Tributes to Baroness Thatcher

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2.35pm

The Prime Minister
(Mr David Cameron)

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I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of tributes to the right hon. Baroness Thatcher of Kesteven LG OM.

In the long history of this Parliament, Margaret Thatcher was our first—and, so far, our only—woman Prime Minister. She won three elections in a row, serving this country for a longer continuous period than any Prime Minister for more than 150 years. She defined, and she overcame, the great challenges of her age, and it is right that Parliament has been recalled to mark our respect. It is also right that next Wednesday Lady Thatcher's coffin will be draped with the flag that she loved, placed on a gun carriage and taken to St Paul's cathedral, and members of all three services will line the route. This will be a fitting salute to a great Prime Minister.

Today, we in the House of Commons are here to pay our own tributes to an extraordinary leader and an extraordinary woman. What she achieved—even before her three terms in office—was remarkable. Those of us who grew up when Margaret Thatcher was already in Downing street can sometimes fail to appreciate the thickness of the glass ceiling that she broke through—from a grocer's shop in Grantham to the highest office in the land. At a time when it was difficult for a woman to become a Member of Parliament, almost inconceivable that one could lead the Conservative party and, by her own reckoning, virtually impossible that a woman could become Prime Minister, she did all three. It is also right to remember that she spent her whole premiership, and indeed much of her life, under direct personal threat from the IRA. She lost two of her closest friends and closest parliamentary colleagues, Airey Neave and Ian Gow, to terrorism. And, of course, she herself was only inches away from death in the Brighton bomb attack of 1984. Yet it was the measure of her leadership that she shook off the dust from that attack and just a few hours later gave an outstanding conference speech reminding us all why democracy must never give in to terror.

Margaret Thatcher was a woman of great contrasts. She could be incredibly formidable in argument yet wonderfully kind in private. In No. 10 Downing street today there are still people who worked with her as Prime Minister, and they talk of her fondly. One assistant tells of how when she got drenched in a downpour on a trip to Cornwall, Margaret Thatcher personally made sure she was looked after and found her a set of dry clothes—of course, she did always prefer dries to wets. *[Laughter.]* On another occasion, one assistant had put in a hand-written note to Mrs Thatcher to say, "Please can you re-sign this minute?" Unfortunately she had left off the hyphen, leaving a note that actually read, "Please can you resign this minute?"—to which the Prime Minister politely replied, "Thank you dear, but I'd rather not."

Column 1614

Margaret Thatcher was faultlessly kind to her staff and utterly devoted to her family. For more than 50 years, Denis was always at her side, an invaluable confidant and friend. Of her, he said this:

"I have been married to one of the greatest women the world has ever produced. All I could produce—small as it may be—was love and loyalty."

We know just how important the support of her family and friends was to Margaret, and I know that today everyone in this House will wish to send our most heartfelt condolences to her children, Carol and Mark, to her grandchildren and to her many, many loyal friends. She was always incredibly kind to me, and it was a huge honour to welcome her to Downing street shortly after I became Prime Minister—something that, when I started working for her in 1988, I never dreamed I would do.

As this day of tributes begins, I would like to acknowledge that there are Members in the House today from all parties who profoundly disagreed with Mrs Thatcher but who have come here today willing to pay their respects. Let me say this to those hon. Members: your generosity of spirit does you great credit and speaks more eloquently than any one person can of the strength and spirit of British statesmanship and British democracy.

Margaret Thatcher was a remarkable type of leader. She said very clearly, "I am not a consensus politician, but a conviction politician." She could sum up those convictions, which were linked profoundly with her upbringing and values, in just a few short phrases: sound money; strong defence; liberty under the rule of law; you should not spend what you have not earned; Governments do not create wealth, but businesses do. The clarity of those convictions was applied with great courage to the problems of the age.

The scale of her achievements is apparent only when we look back to Britain in the 1970s. Successive Governments had failed to deal with what was beginning to be called the British disease: appalling industrial relations, poor productivity and persistently high inflation. Although it seems absurd today, the state had got so big that it owned our airports and airline, the phones in our houses, trucks on our roads, and even a removal company. The air was thick with defeatism. There was a sense that the role of Government was simply to manage decline. Margaret Thatcher rejected this defeatism. She had a clear view about what needed to change. Inflation was to be controlled not by incomes policies, but by monetary and fiscal discipline; industries were to be set free into the private sector; trade unions should be handed back to their members; and people should be able to buy their own council homes. Success in these endeavours was never assured. Her political story was one of a perpetual battle, in the country, in this place and sometimes even in her own Cabinet.

Of course, her career could have taken an entirely different path. In the late 1940s, before she entered politics, the then Margaret Roberts went for a job at ICI. The personnel department rejected her application and afterwards wrote:

Column 1615

"This woman is headstrong, obstinate and dangerously self-opinionated."

Even her closest friends would agree that she could be all those things, but the point is this: she used that conviction and resolve in the service of her country, and we are all the better for that.

Margaret Thatcher was also a great parliamentarian. She loved and respected this place and was for many years its finest debater. She was utterly fastidious in her preparations. I was a junior party researcher in the 1980s, and the trauma of preparation for Prime Minister's questions is still seared into my memory. Twice a week it was as if the arms of a giant octopus shook every building in Whitehall for every analysis of every problem and every answer to every question. Her respect for Parliament was instilled in others. Early in her first Government, a junior Minister was seen running through the Lobby. His hair was dishevelled and he was carrying a heavy box and a full tray of papers under his arm. Another Member cried out, "Slow down. Rome wasn't built in a day." The Minister replied, "Yes, but Margaret Thatcher wasn't the foreman on that job."

As Tony Blair said this week—rightly, in my view—Margaret Thatcher was one of the very few leaders who changed the political landscape not only in their own country, but in the rest of the world. She was no starry-eyed internationalist, but again her approach was rooted in some simple and clear principles: strength abroad begins with strength at home; deterrence, not appeasement; and the importance of national sovereignty, which is why she fought so passionately for Britain's interests in Europe and always believed that Britain should keep its own currency.

Above all, she believed to the core of her being that Britain stood for something in the world: for democracy, for the rule of law, for right over might. She loathed communism and believed in the invincible power of the human spirit to resist and ultimately defeat tyranny. She never forgot that Warsaw, Prague and Budapest were great European cities, capitals of free nations temporarily trapped behind the iron curtain.

Today, in different corners of the world, millions of people know that they owe their freedom, in part, to Margaret Thatcher—in Kuwait, which she helped free from Saddam's jackboot; across eastern and central Europe; and, of course, in the Falkland Islands. A week from now, as people gather in London to lay Margaret Thatcher to rest, the sun will be rising over the Falklands, and because of her courage and because of the skill, bravery and sacrifice of our armed forces, it will rise again for freedom.

Much has been said about the battles that Margaret Thatcher fought. She certainly did not shy from the fight and that led to arguments, to conflict and, yes, even to division, but what is remarkable, looking back now, is how many of those arguments are no longer arguments at all. No one wants to return to strikes without a ballot. No one believes that large industrial companies should be owned by the state. The nuclear deterrent, NATO and the special relationship are widely accepted as the cornerstones of our security and defence policies. We argue—sometimes very passionately—in this House about tax, but none of us is arguing for a return to tax rates of 98%. So many of the principles that Lady Thatcher fought for are now part of the accepted political landscape of our country. As Winston Churchill once put it, there are some politicians who "make the weather", and Margaret Thatcher was undoubtedly one of them.

Column 1616

In the Members' Lobby of the House of Commons there are rightly four principal statues: Lloyd George, who gave us the beginnings of the welfare state; Winston Churchill, who gave us victory in war; Clement Attlee, who gave us the NHS; and Margaret Thatcher, who rescued our country from post-war decline. They say that cometh the hour, cometh the man. Well, in 1979 came the hour, and came the lady. She made the political weather. She made history. And let this be her epitaph: she made our country great again. I commend the motion to the House.

2.47pm

Edward Miliband
(Doncaster North) (Lab)

Share

I join the Prime Minister in commemorating the extraordinary life and unique contribution of Margaret Thatcher. I join him, too, in sending my deepest condolences to her children, Carol and Mark, the whole family and her many, many close friends.

Today is an opportunity for us to reflect on Margaret Thatcher's personal achievements, her style of politics and her political legacy. As the Prime Minister said, the journey from being the child of a grocer to Downing street is an unlikely one, and it is particularly remarkable because she was the daughter, not the son, of a grocer. At each stage of her life, she broke the mould: a woman at Oxford when not a single woman in the university held a full professorship; a woman chemist when most people assumed scientists had to be men; a woman candidate for Parliament in 1950, against the opposition of some in her local party in Dartford, at the age of only 24; a woman MP in 1959 when just 4% of MPs in the whole of this House were women; the only woman in the Cabinet when she was appointed in 1970; and, of course, the first woman Prime Minister. It is no wonder she remarked as early as 1965 in a speech to the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds conference:

"In politics if you want anything said, ask a man. If you want anything done, ask a woman."

I am sure some people in this House—and no doubt many more in the country—will agree with that sentiment.

Having broken so many conventions as a woman, it cannot be a coincidence that she was someone who, in so many other areas of life, was willing to take on the established orthodoxies. Margaret Thatcher's ability to overcome every obstacle in her path was just one measure of her personal strength, and that takes me to her style of politics. We can disagree with Margaret Thatcher, but it is important to understand the kind of political leader she was. What was unusual was that she sought to be rooted in people's daily lives, but she also believed that ideology mattered. Not for her the contempt sometimes heaped on ideas and new thinking in political life, and while she never would have claimed to be, or wanted to be seen as, an intellectual, she believed and showed that ideas matter in politics.

In 1945, before the end of the war, she bought a copy of Friedrich Hayek's "The Road to Serfdom". There is even a story that she suggested that Conservative central office distribute it in the 1945 general election campaign. She said:

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"It left a permanent mark on my own political character",

and nobody can grasp Margaret Thatcher's achievements, and Thatcherism, without also appreciating the ideas that were its foundation and the way in which they departed from the prevailing consensus of the time. In typical homespun style on breakfast TV she said in 1995:

"Consensus doesn't give you any direction. It is like mixing all the constituent ingredients together and not coming out with a cake...Democracy is about the people being given a choice."

It was that approach which enabled her to define the politics of a whole generation, and influence the politics of generations to come.

The Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister and I all came of age in the 1980s, when people defined their politics by being for or against what she was doing. It is fair to say that we took different paths. Thirty years on, the people of Britain still argue about her legacy. She was right to understand the sense of aspiration felt by people across the country, and she was right to recognise that our economy needed to change. She said in 1982:

"How absurd it will seem in a few years' time that the state ran Pickfords removals and the Gleneagles Hotel."

She was right. In foreign policy, she was right to defend the Falklands and bravely reach out to new leadership in the Soviet Union, and something often forgotten is that she was the first political leader in any major country to warn of the dangers of climate change, long before anyone thought of hugging a husky.

But it would be dishonest and not in keeping with the principles that Margaret Thatcher stood for not to be open with the House, even on this day, about the strong opinions and deep divisions there were, and are, over what she did. In mining areas such as the one I represent, communities felt angry and abandoned. Gay and lesbian people felt stigmatised by measures such as section 28, which today's Conservative party has rightly repudiated. It was no accident that when the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) became leader of the Conservative party, he wrote a pamphlet called, "There is Such a Thing as Society." On the world stage, as the Prime Minister rightly said in 2006 when he was Leader of the Opposition, Margaret Thatcher made the wrong judgment about Nelson Mandela and about sanctions in South Africa.

Debates about Margaret Thatcher and what she represented will continue for many years to come, which is a mark of her significance as a political leader. She was someone with deep convictions and was willing to act on them. As she put it:

"Politics is more when you have convictions than a matter of multiple manoeuvrings to get through the problems of the day".

As a person, nothing became her so much as the manner of her final years, which saw the loss of her beloved husband, Denis, and her struggle with illness. She bore both with the utmost dignity and courage—the same courage that she showed decades earlier after the atrocity of the Brighton bombing. I will always remember seeing her at the Cenotaph in frail health but determined to pay her respect to our troops and do her duty by the country.

Whatever one's view of her, Margaret Thatcher was a unique and towering figure. I disagree with much of what she did, but I respect what her death means to the many, many people who admired her, and I honour her personal achievements. On previous occasions, we have come to this House to remember the extraordinary Prime Ministers who have served our nation. Today, we also remember a Prime Minister who defined her age.

Column 1618

2.54pm

Mr John Redwood
(Wokingham) (Con)

Share

It is a pleasure to rise so soon after two such outstanding speeches. On behalf of the House, I pay tribute to both the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition, who captured the essence of Margaret Thatcher the woman, and the essence of Margaret Thatcher the politician and stateswoman. We are in their debt for getting our day off to such a superb start.

I wish to be brief, but I would like to put on record that Margaret Thatcher was the best boss I ever worked for. I was her chief policy adviser in the middle years and was subsequently able to advise and help her a bit as a Member of Parliament and a junior Minister.

Margaret Thatcher was that great figure because her private side was so different from her public side. Yes, many people beyond the House remember the woman who was so powerful in argument and so fierce in conviction, but those who worked with her closely saw someone who worked incredibly long hours with great energy and diligence because she was so keen to get it right.

Margaret Thatcher took a very wide range of advice. When people worked with her and put an idea to her, not only did they need to produce all the evidence and the facts and go over it many times, but they knew that person after person going to Downing street would be given it as a kind of test. They did not know that they were part of a running focus group, but one's idea was in front of the guests, who were asked to shoot it down, because she was so desperately concerned never to use the power of the great office without proper thought. She was also keen to ensure that, before she did anything, she knew what the criticisms would be and what might go wrong with it, because she had tested it to destruction. There is a lot to recommend that approach to those who are making mighty decisions—they should spend time and take trouble, go to a wide range of advice, and ensure that something works well before it is put out there.

Margaret Thatcher came, in the middle of her period in office, to be the champion of wider ownership and wider participation. To me, that was her at her best—when she could reach out beyond the confines of the Conservative party, which she led so well in those days, and beyond the confines of her fairly solid 40% voting support, much more widely in the country. A Prime Minister can become a great national leader when their ideas resonate more widely, and when their ideas become popular with, or are taken up by, those who would normally oppose them.

That spirit of Margaret Thatcher—she had fought her way as a schoolgirl to Oxford, as an Oxford graduate to Parliament, and as a parliamentarian to the Cabinet—made her feel that opportunity was there for people. However, she recognised that it was very difficult, particularly for women and people from certain backgrounds, and always told us that it did not matter where people came from or who their mother and father were, and that what mattered was what people could contribute. That, surely, is a message that goes way beyond the confines of the Conservative party or the years of her supremacy in Parliament. We should all remember that.

Column 1619

When we tried to produce policies to reflect that more generally, we came up with an idea. Owning a home had been the privilege of the richer part of society, but we wondered why everyone or practically everyone should not aspire to it. That is when the council house sale idea gathered more momentum. Many Labour Members in the early days were very unhappy—debates on the policy remain—but an awful lot of Labour voters and even some Labour councillors decided it was a really good policy and joined us on it. It was one of those policies that reached out so much more widely.

We tried to extend the idea to the ownership of big and small businesses with a big programme of wider share ownership, and with the employee and public elements in the great privatisations. Margaret Thatcher was determined to try to get Britain to break out of the debilitating cycle of decline that we had witnessed under Labour and Conservative Governments in the post-war years.

I have just one fact that the House and those who are worried by the depressing number of jobs lost in the 1980s in the pits and steel industry might like to bear in mind. The newly nationalised coal industry in the early 1950s had 700,000 employees; by the time Margaret Thatcher came to office in 1979, only 235,000 of those jobs were left. There had been a massive haemorrhage of jobs throughout the post-war period. Similar figures could be adduced for rail, steel and the other commanding heights. It was that which drove her to say that there must be a better answer and a way of modernising the old industries and bringing in the new industries. One of her legacies is the modernisation of the car industry, which gathered momentum under the Labour Government and, more recently, under the coalition.

Margaret Thatcher's other great triumph, as the Prime Minister mentioned, was to extend her argument to a much wider audience around the world. The ideas of empowerment, enfranchisement, participation, breaking up industries, allowing competition and new ideas, and allowing the public to be part of the process were exported and took off around the world. That lay behind much of the spirit of revolution in eastern Europe which led to the bringing down of the Berlin wall. If there is a single picture of the Thatcher legacy that I will remember, it is the tumbling of the Berlin wall and the realisation that the path of enterprise and freedom that has been adopted by all the democratic parties in this House is the right approach, and that tyranny and communism do not work.

We are discussing a great lady, a great statesman, a huge personal achievement and a very big achievement politically. At its best, it was an achievement that broke free from conservatism and party dogma, and which showed the world that there is a better way, a democratic way, a freedom-loving way.

3.01pm

The Deputy Prime Minister
(Mr Nick Clegg)

Share

On behalf of the Liberal Democrats, I would like to pay tribute to Lady Thatcher. We send our sincere condolences to her family and friends, in particular to her children, Mark and Carol.

Column 1620

Like all of us who are not members of the Conservative party and who disagreed with many of the things that Margaret Thatcher did, I have thought long and hard about what to say. I am a Sheffield MP—a city where the mere mention of her name even now elicits strong reactions. I would like to think that she would be pleased that she still provokes trepidation and uncertainty among the leaders of other parties, even when she is not here, eyeballing us across the House. The fact that those of us who are not from her party can shun the tenets of Thatcherism and yet respect Margaret Thatcher is part of what was so remarkable about her. It is in that spirit that I would like to make three short observations.

First, whether people liked or disliked her, it is impossible to deny the indelible imprint that Margaret Thatcher made on the nation and the wider world. She was among those very rare leaders who become a towering historical figure not as written in the history books, but while still in the prime of their political life. Whatever else is said about her, Margaret Thatcher created a paradigm. She set the parameters of economic, political and social debate for decades to come. She drew the lines on the political map that we are still navigating today.

Secondly, Margaret Thatcher was one of the most caricatured figures in modern British politics, yet she was easily one of the most complex. On the one hand, she is remembered as the eponymous ideologue, responsible for her own "-ism". In reality, much of her politics was subtle and pragmatic, and she was sometimes driven by events. Margaret Thatcher was a staunch patriot who was much more comfortable reaching out across the Atlantic than across the channel. However, she participated in one of the most profound periods of European integration and was herself an architect of the single market. Although she was a Conservative to her core, leading a party that traditionally likes to conserve things, she held a deep aversion to the status quo. She was restive about the future, determined to use politics as a force for reform and never feared short-term disruption in pursuit of long-term change. In many ways a traditionalist, she was one of the most iconoclastic politicians of our age.

Margaret Thatcher was therefore far from the cardboard cut-out that is sometimes imagined. For me, the best tribute to her is not to consign her to being a simplified heroine or villain, but to remember her with all the nuance, unresolved complexity and paradox that she possessed.

Finally, there was an extraordinary, even unsettling directness about her political presence. I remember vividly, aged 20, reading that Margaret Thatcher had said that there was no such thing as society. I was dismayed. It was not the kind of thing that a wide-eyed, idealistic social anthropology undergraduate wanted to hear. With hindsight, what strikes me is that although I disagreed with the untempered individualism that those words implied, I never for a second thought that she was being cynical, striking a pose or taking a position for short-term effect.

You always knew, with Margaret Thatcher, that she believed what she said. It is interesting to reflect on how she would have reacted to today's political culture of 24-hour news, pollsters and focus groups. She seemed blissfully indifferent to the popularity of what she said, entirely driven instead by the conviction of what she said. Somehow, her directness made you feel as if she were arguing directly with you—as if it were a clash of her convictions against yours. As a result, you somehow felt as if you knew her, even if you did not.

Column 1621

Whether she inspired or confronted, led or attacked, she did it all with uncluttered clarity. Her memory will no doubt continue to divide opinion and stir deep emotion, but as we as a nation say farewell to a figure who loomed so large, one thing is for sure: the memory of her will continue undimmed, strong and clear for years to come, in keeping with the unusual, unique character of Margaret Thatcher herself.

3.05pm

Mr Nigel Dodds
(Belfast North) (DUP)

Share

Let me begin, on behalf of my right hon. and hon. Friends, by conveying our deepest sympathies to the family of Baroness Thatcher, to her children, and to her grandchildren. Let me also thank you, Mr. Speaker, for recalling Parliament. It is right that we, the representatives of the people of the United Kingdom, should meet in this Chamber that she dominated for so long to pay tribute, but also to reflect on her long period in office.

Baroness Thatcher was many things. As has been said, she was a pioneer. She was the first female leader of a major political party in the United Kingdom, and the first female Prime Minister. She did break that glass ceiling, but she also broke through the social barrier that stood in the way of anyone of that time and generation becoming the leader of a major political party. She was a woman of personal and political courage, a politician of formidable ability, and a stateswoman who transformed not only the United Kingdom but played an enormous role in changing, fundamentally, the world order.

Of course, there were many who disagreed with her. Even within her own party and among those of us who are Unionists in Northern Ireland there were those who disagreed with her on occasion, particularly in relation to the Anglo-Irish agreement. But whatever our views, people today, by and large, must accept, acknowledge and admire her as a politician and statesperson of conviction. The days of focus groups, the amorphous middle, the soft imagining—none of that would have suited her. How many times have we heard it said, during her lifetime and since, that, like her or loathe her, at least you knew where Maggie stood? People admire that in their politicians. It is something that people want to see.

Part of her attraction was that she was seen as taking on the vested interests and the political establishment. She was impatient of the old brigade, and prepared to shake things up. However, like all great human beings and all great politicians, she was a person of contradictions. Very often her rhetoric did not match her actions, and her instincts were blunted. She did become persuaded, on some issues, against her better judgment. On Europe, she is rightly lauded for the actions that she took in relation to, for instance, securing our rebate, for her stance against European federalism, for her Bruges speech, and for her stance in defence of our currency; yet she signed and implemented the Single European Act, which many see as the forerunner of the Maastricht agreement.

On Northern Ireland, again, she was full of contradictions. We in the Democratic Unionist party, and indeed the entire Unionist community in Northern Ireland in the 1980s, opposed the Anglo-Irish agreement, and many Conservative Members and others opposed it too. Once she had said that Ulster was as British as Finchley; once she had said, rightly, that it was "out, out, out" to a united Ireland, a federal Ireland or joint authority. Yet a year later, in 1985, she signed the Anglo-Irish agreement without any consultation with the Unionist community, and without its consent.

Column 1622

The reason many Unionists felt and spoke so strongly at that time, and why there remain many strong feelings about that era, is that they remembered her strong stance during the hunger strikes, when she had stood up in defence of democracy and against terrorism; they remembered how, as the Prime Minister and others mentioned, she had suffered the loss of close colleagues to terrorism; and they remembered how she herself, just a year before, had survived an IRA assassination attempt. Despite that, she was persuaded to the sign the Anglo-Irish agreement.

I am glad that in her later life, Margaret Thatcher came to recognise that the agreement was a mistake. Lord Powell, her former close adviser, said the other night on "Newsnight" that, as it is said of Mary Queen of Scots that the word "Calais" was inscribed on her heart, so he believed that the words "the Anglo-Irish agreement" would be inscribed on the heart of Margaret Thatcher, because she had become increasingly disillusioned with it. People say, "But was it not the template for what we now have in Ulster?" I say it was not, because we cannot base a future on exclusion. I say that as a Unionist in Northern Ireland, with all our history, because we must be governed by the inclusion of all communities. Today, there is little of the Anglo-Irish agreement left and instead we have a settlement that has been consulted on and has the consent and agreement of both communities in Northern Ireland. I am glad that we have that, as opposed to the previous approach.

I want to close by saying, yes, we had our disagreements with Margaret Thatcher, but she was, fundamentally, instinctively and truly, a great patriot, a great Unionist and a great Briton, and that is why we are right to pay tribute to her today, while recognising her faults and the divisions that exist—of course, there are divisions, but there were divisions long before Margaret Thatcher, and there will be divisions long after her in other eras. She is not unique in that sense. I heard today Gerry Adams and others talk about the legacy of Margaret Thatcher as if she and the British Government and the British state had created the violence in Northern Ireland. The fact is, of course, that the hunger strikers were in jail and had been convicted for terrorist acts long before she came to office.

Those on our streets in Belfast and elsewhere in the United Kingdom—in Glasgow, Bristol or wherever—engaging in the sort of ghoulish celebrations and obscene acts that appal the entire nation should think again of her words: she once said that she took great solace in those who hated her so much because she knew then that she was doing what was right and that they hated her for it.

We—especially those of us in Ulster—must remember Margaret Thatcher for the great things she did for our country, while not remembering her through rose-tinted spectacles. It is right, however, that we mark her life and period in office. Hers was an enormous contribution and an ever-lasting memorial to democracy and freedom in this country and across the world.

Column 1623

3.13pm

Sir Malcolm Rifkind
(Kensington) (Con)

Share

I was privileged, along with the Minister without Portfolio, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), to serve in Margaret Thatcher's Government for the full 11 years of her term of office and to be in her Cabinet for almost half that time. It was never dull. Each day we saw political leadership and statesmanship of the highest order and a Prime Minister with remarkable personal qualities. It was sometimes said that she did not have a sense of humour, and it was true that there was very little wit in many of her speeches, but I recall on one occasion that she was asked, "Mrs Thatcher, do you believe in consensus?" To our surprise, we heard her saying, "Yes, I do believe in consensus: there should be a consensus behind my convictions." I thought at the time that this was an extraordinary example of wit, but as the years have gone by I have realised that she was actually being deadly serious.

It was also said that Margaret Thatcher could be very intolerant of those who did not agree with her. That was also a parody of the truth. She was intolerant of people who were woolly and who argued that things could not be done because they would be unpopular or that it was too difficult, but when she met someone able to argue from a point of fact and whom she respected, she not only listened, but could change her mind. I was moved to the Foreign Office at the time of the Falklands, and she recalled Sir Anthony Parsons, our ambassador at the Security Council, to ask him how it was going at the United Nations. He had never met her before; he was a rather grand diplomat. When he started trying to report to her, she, not uncharacteristically, kept interrupting him, and he was not used to this. After the fourth interruption, he stopped and said, "Prime Minister, if you didn't interrupt me so often, you might find that you didn't need to." She not only kept quiet but six months later appointed him her foreign policy adviser.

Of course she was a great leader of the Conservative party, but people are entitled to ask, "Was she actually a Conservative? Does not the word "conservative" normally mean someone who is rather wedded to tradition, cautious of change, and unwilling to act too precipitately?" Yet she was the most radical Prime Minister of the past few generations. There is nevertheless a consistency between those two statements, because she had recognised that Britain had gone the wrong way—that it had taken the wrong path for 20 or 30 years, and that needed change. That is what made her a radical. Many hon. Members will know the great novel, "The Leopard", by Giuseppe di Lampedusa, in which the hero says: "If you want things to stay the same, things will have to change." That was very much her belief.

Having spent a lot of my time in the Foreign Office, I am conscious of the fact that diplomats in the Foreign Office were not her favourite Department. I went to see her when I was Defence Secretary some years later, after she had retired, and she said to me, "You know, Ministry of Defence, your problem is you've got no allies. The Foreign Office aren't wet—they're drenched." When it came to the Foreign Office and to diplomats, she sometimes had a remarkable capacity to distance herself from the Government of which she was Prime Minister.

On one glorious occasion in which I was personally involved, we had a difficult negotiation getting a package of sanctions against South Africa. They did not include economic sanctions, but she was very unhappy that one of the proposals at the European Community Council was that we should withdraw our defence attachés. The Ministry of Defence did not mind, but it took an awful long time for Geoffrey Howe to persuade her to go along with this, and she was basically unconvinced but did go along with it. Some weeks later, we had a visit from the President of Mozambique, and I was asked to sit in on the meeting at Downing street. The President rebuked her for not doing enough against apartheid in South Africa. I will never forget her response. She bridled and said, "Mr President, that is simply not the case. We are refusing to sell arms to South Africa. We have initiated the Gleneagles agreement whereby we don't have any sporting contact with South Africa. We're using all diplomatic means to try and bring down apartheid." "We, we, we", she said—and then suddenly she stopped, pointed at me, and said, "They've decided to withdraw our defence attachés," adding, "I don't know what good that will do." The President of Mozambique was rather bemused by what seemed to be happening.

Column 1624

Although she may have had mixed feelings about the Foreign Office, she actually owed it a great debt of gratitude, because one of her greatest triumphs—her relationship with Mr Gorbachev and what flowed from that—was a result of the diplomats in the Foreign Office spotting at a very early stage that the youngest new member of the politburo, Mikhail Gorbachev, was a man to try to cultivate, and she had the wisdom to accept their advice. We should not underestimate what followed from that, which was her persuading Ronald Reagan to accept her view that Gorbachev was a man with whom we could do business. Reagan would not have accepted that advice from most people, but coming from the Iron Lady, he said, "Well, if she believes that, then I can proceed on that basis." The result was not only a remarkable set of initiatives but the end of the cold war and the liberation of eastern Europe without a shot being fired—a remarkable epitaph.

I do not intend to speak for too long, but I want to make one other point. One of the big issues that is relevant to the debates we have today is whether, in the relationship with the United States, British Prime Ministers always have to agree with the President or otherwise we risk that relationship. All I can say is that Margaret Thatcher had no doubt that the answer was, "No, you don't have to." On several occasions she had deep disagreements with Ronald Reagan, one of her closest friends. For example, when British companies had got contracts to help to build a Soviet oil pipeline in the early 1980s, the Americans threatened sanctions against those British companies, and Margaret Thatcher bitterly criticised them. I was sent off to Washington as a junior Minister to have meetings with Mr Kenneth Dam, the American deputy Secretary of State. We reached a compromise. The only thing we could not agree on was whether the compromise should be known as the Rifkind-Dam agreement or the Dam-Rifkind agreement.

Margaret Thatcher had openly and publicly disagreed with Reagan on the Reykjavik summit, when she felt that he was surrendering too many nuclear weapons without getting enough in return, but most important of all, she bitterly resented the invasion of Grenada. The House will recall that Grenada was invaded by the United States, which had forgotten, unfortunately, that Her Majesty was the Head of State of Grenada, and had not even informed the British Government of what it was about to do. Margaret Thatcher not only criticised it, but she went on the BBC World Service attacking the United States and saying that it could not behave like that. Some days later, Reagan recorded in his memoirs that he was sitting in the Oval office with some of his aides and he was told that the British Prime Minister was on the phone and would he take a call. Yes, he said, of course he would. She started berating him in a rather strident way down the telephone. It went on for only about a minute, but some of us who have been on the receiving end know how long that can feel. When she was in full flight, Reagan put his hand over the receiver so that she could not hear, turned to his aides and said, "Gee, isn't she marvellous?" Far from resenting it, they appreciated that sometimes they got it wrong and even their closest allies were entitled to point it out.

Column 1625

I conclude by saying that Margaret Thatcher was someone who did not worry, as has already been remarked, about people being rude about her. The term "Iron Lady" was first coined by the Soviets as an insult. She, of course, took it as on a badge of pride. Denis Healey referred to her memorably as Attila the Hen. François Mitterrand famously said she had the eyes of Caligula and the lips of Marilyn Monroe. She took them all as compliments because she asked for no quarter and she certainly gave none.

Next week, I shall be at the funeral at St Paul's. I was at Churchill's funeral in St Paul's—well, that is not quite the whole truth. I was an 18-year-old student who had hitchhiked down to London, spent the night on the pavement and watched the arrival at St Paul's cathedral. We will honour the other great Prime Minister of the past 50, 60 or 70 years, Margaret Thatcher, in a similar way. That is something which not only we can be proud of and the country can be proud of, but the whole world has a debt to her, which it fully recognises as well.

3.22pm

Angus Robertson
(Moray) (SNP)

Share

Thank you, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to make a brief contribution. It is right to acknowledge that Margaret Thatcher was one of the most formidable politicians of recent times. To her family, to her friends, to her colleagues, to her supporters, I extend the condolences of the Scottish National party and Plaid Cymru.

It would be wrong, however, not to put on record our profound disagreement with her socially and economically divisive policies, which were particularly opposed in Scotland and Wales. We will never forget, we will never forgive the poll tax being imposed on Scots a year before the rest of the UK. No country should have such policies imposed on it when they were rejected at the ballot box. The existence of the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh National Assembly follows this experience.

Margaret Thatcher will be remembered for a long time in Scotland and Wales. She helped remind us that we have a national consensus that values society, values solidarity and values community. For that at least, we can be grateful.

3.23pm

Mr Peter Lilley
(Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con)

Share

For those of us who worked with, loved and admired Mrs Thatcher, her death is immensely sad, but there is one small compensation: she leaves immensely vivid memories. So vigorous, energetic and decisive was her personality that she is unforgettable not just to those of us who worked with her, but to everybody in the country who was there at the time.

Column 1626

I first worked for Mrs Thatcher as a humble speech writer, long before I entered Parliament or became a Minister and eventually joined her Cabinet. My most personal memories conflict with the caricature that has been built up over time, as much by her friends as by her opponents. First, she was immensely kind. The less important someone was, the kinder she was to them. She gave her Ministers a pretty hard time, and quite right too. I remember an occasion on which she had returned from three days abroad, having had little sleep. I had been summoned, in my role as a minor cog in her speech-writing machine, to help with some speech. She tore a strip off the Chancellor of the Exchequer before noticing me. She saw that I was wearing a black tie and deduced that I had been to a funeral, and was immediately full of solicitude for me—in marked contrast to her tearing a strip off her senior Minister.

Mrs Thatcher could also be remarkably diplomatic, not least in how she handled those who worked for her. As a junior Treasury Minister, I once ventured to disagree with a policy of a Secretary of State, and we were both summoned to appear before her to argue our respective cases. I thought my arguments were overwhelmingly the better ones, but she summed up in favour of the Secretary of State. Subsequently, she sent me a private message saying, "Peter, I was impressed by your arguments but it would have been quite wrong for me to overrule a senior Minister in favour of a junior Minister on a matter that was not of paramount importance." She was right.

Mrs Thatcher was also very cautious, again in contrast to the legend that she recklessly took on all comers. At the expense of a humiliating settlement with Arthur Scargill in her first Parliament, she deferred a confrontation in order to allow Nigel Lawson to build up coal stocks so that, should another confrontation arise—as indeed it did—the nation would not be held to ransom. Her trade union reforms were implemented progressively, step by step, and whenever she felt that she had bitten off enough for one Parliament, she would politely reject proposals for further reform, however much they appealed to her. However, once she was convinced that a policy was right in principle and workable in practice, and that it had been elaborated in detail—of which she had a masterly grasp while maintaining a focus on the central issues—she would push it through with unswerving tenacity.

It is probably not done on these occasions to face up to the criticisms that have been made of Mrs Thatcher, but she was never one to be limited by what was the done thing. I want to respond to the comments, made more in the media and also by the hon. Member for Moray (Angus Robertson), that she was deliberately harsh and divisive. It is said that she was harsh, but she made us face reality, and reality was harsh. Those who did not like facing reality projected their hatred of reality on to her. The human cost of facing up to reality would have been much less if previous Governments of both parties had not, for reasons of false analysis and cowardice, failed to deal with those realities earlier. If blame is due for the fact that any harshness materialised, it is due to her predecessors rather than to her. Those who hated reality, who hated being proved wrong and who hated seeing their illusions shattered transferred their hatred to her. Fortunately, she was big and strong enough to act as a lightning rod for their feelings.

Column 1627

A second adjective, "divisive", was used of Margaret Thatcher this morning by the BBC in its headline news, which probably tells us more about the BBC than it does about her. She was described as a divisive leader. That is a strange epithet, because for any division to exist, there have to be two sides, yet no mention was made of those who opposed the changes that proved so necessary. It is stranger still when we consider that her greatest success was, by her own admission, to convert her opponents to her way of seeing things. Not a single one of the major measures she introduced was subsequently repealed or reversed by those who followed her. Indeed, she has the extraordinary achievement of uniting all parties in this House behind a new paradigm: before she came along the assumption was that all problems could best be solved by top-down direction and control of the state. She introduced the idea that quality and efficiency are most likely to follow if people are free to choose between alternatives. That is now, I am happy to say, a model adopted by other parties and, after a faltering start, was implemented by Tony Blair, even in the public services where she had to feared to step. Far from being harsh or divisive, she leaves a legacy that unites us all. It behoves us, on a day such as this, to remember that.

3.30pm

Dr Alasdair McDonnell
(Belfast South) (SDLP)

Share

I rise to sympathise with Baroness Thatcher's family, friend and colleagues in this House and elsewhere. To them I offer my profound condolences.

I rise as a proud Irish nationalist in the proud tradition of O'Connell and Parnell, and in the positive political tradition of my predecessors John Hume, Seamus Mallon and Eddie McGrady. This is a solemn day and it is with solemnity and sincerity that I speak on behalf of democratic Irish nationalism.

I acknowledge the wide range of contributions across the House. It is clear from some of those testimonies that there was a side to Baroness Thatcher which those who knew her personally saw and for which they cherished her. I am not here to deny or counter those personal truths, but as a democratic Irish nationalist I must speak with sincerity and honesty about her political contribution and legacy. She always expected and respected candour. Not to register our differences with her politics and approach would be a dereliction of responsibility. Many have said, in earlier contributions, that in many ways Baroness Thatcher made a divisive political contribution and has left a divisive legacy in Britain. That, too, is the case in Ireland.

She was a formidable lady and a formidable politician, and only a formidable politician could have made the breakthrough she made—that cannot be denied. Neither can it be denied, however, that she caused great pain, hurt and distress in Northern Ireland. She was ill advised that the very deep political issue, driven by many injustices in Ireland, could be solved by military and security methods alone. Her policy and her approach to hunger strikes hardened and polarised moderate opinion, and demonstrated a lack of knowledge of the island of Ireland and our peoples. Her actions proved counter-productive to her own cause time and time again, handing the IRA political propaganda victory after political propaganda victory. The culture of collusion within the security service, and the licence it had from Government, was also a major problem. The fact that at the time concerns raised by the SDLP were rubbished and dismissed—they have subsequently been vindicated by de Silva and many police ombudsman reports—all served to harden and alienate further constitutional nationalist opinion. That has left many questions, much hurt and a legacy that remains to this day. A large part of that unfinished legacy is how we must deal with the past and help the many victims, not just in Ireland but on this side of the Irish sea as well. The quest for truth will go on.

Column 1628

Our difficulties and political differences did not stop on the shores of these islands. The SDLP not only held a different outlook on Europe, but opposed the resistance to challenging the apartheid regime in South Africa. We disagreed with the attitude towards the African National Congress, and opposed the criminalisation of Nelson Mandela. I note that in the past few days the ANC has displayed great humanity in its response to the death of Baroness Thatcher, and it is with that humanity that I join in solidarity.

We can deal with many difficulties and differences, but history has shown that the signing of the Anglo-Irish agreement, by Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister and Garret FitzGerald as Taoiseach, was a pivotal and defining moment in our shared history. Indeed, it was a pivotal moment in changing the direction of our relationships in these islands. It was the first significant agreement between Ireland and Britain since the treaty of 1921, and it laid the foundations for the peace process and much of the progress that has taken place in the past 27 years. It changed for ever relationships between our two countries and was the foundation of many of the positive changes we have experienced since.

It is poignant that today is the 15th anniversary of the signing of the Belfast agreement—the Good Friday agreement. That effort involved building layers upon layers of understanding, and moving on from that agreement over the past 15 years has involved building more layers of understanding, but we have to agree that the bedrock and the foundation for all that has been achieved was the Anglo-Irish agreement in 1985. The signing of that agreement showed that, as some said earlier, at times Baroness Thatcher did listen to good advice from her advisers. She also listened to her friends—formidable friends such as US President Ronald Reagan; but just as Prime Minister Thatcher might not have recognised the malignant hardening and polarising effect of her policy and attitude towards hunger strikes, she may not have appreciated or recognised the potential benign and long-term softening effect on future relationships of her commitment in that Anglo-Irish agreement.

In placing our problem in these islands in a British-Irish context, the Anglo-Irish agreement challenged the traditional Unionist mindset and equipped political constitutional nationalism to make an even more compelling case against violence to those engaged in violence. Indeed, I believe it laid the foundation for stopping the violence in Ireland. At that stage, the pages were turned to a new history—the beginning of a new history in Northern Ireland, and with it a new history for these islands as a whole. The benefits of the Anglo-Irish and Good Friday agreements are being reaped today by the peoples of Britain and Ireland, who continue to benefit from the positive engagement that started with and continues to flow from Baroness Thatcher's signing of the Anglo-Irish agreement. Baroness Thatcher may not have recognised the full effect of that moment in history, but it is right that I on behalf of Irish nationalism recognise it today, just as the SDLP recognised it at the time of the passing of Dr Garret FitzGerald.

Column 1629

I join others across the House, the President of Ireland and the Irish Government in extending my sympathies to the children and family of Baroness Thatcher, and to her friends not just in Britain but across the world. Baroness Thatcher enjoyed confronting political challenges; her legacy may be divisive but she herself did not shirk from that in life. As an Irish nationalist in the democratic non-violent tradition, I will not be dishonourable, but neither can I be dishonest in not commenting on that legacy.

3.38pm

Conor Burns
(Bournemouth West) (Con)

Share

Monday was the day we had all been dreading in recent months and years. Much has been written about the state of Lady Thatcher's health in recent years. You will remember, Mr Speaker, only 18 months ago hosting her in your state rooms when she came to support me at an occasion that turned out to be one of her last visits to the Palace of Westminster. May I say, Mr Speaker, that she was grateful for your support and kindness to her on that occasion?

Lady Thatcher came back from so many health scares that we thought she would go on for ever. In the words of the poem:

"If I had thought thou couldst have died,

I might not weep for thee;

But I forgot, when by thy side,

That thou couldst mortal be."

As I watched the television coverage about this remarkable lady, I felt a deep sense of personal loss. Some of us have lost a dear friend, who in my case was not only a friend but a mentor and protectress—someone I loved and cared for very deeply.

I first met Margaret Thatcher back in 1992, when she came to support my hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) in Southampton, Itchen, his then constituency. Over the years, she was enormously supportive of my efforts to get elected to this place. I remember that in 2001, she came to support me in Eastleigh. We took her to a health club in a visit covered live on Sky News. The chief executive of the entire group had come to welcome her. She announced to him, "These places are a complete waste of time—up and down stairs keeps me fit!"

In 2002, I had what must have been the unique privilege of welcoming Ted Heath and Margaret Thatcher to Eastleigh in the same month. When Ted was coming, I warned the people in my association, "For goodness' sake, don't put out the Thatcher-Tebbit fliers!" Well, they did. Ted reached for one of them, looked at it and said to me, "What on earth are you doing with those two?" I said, "Well, they agreed to come." He then said what I suppose for him was a grudging compliment—"I suppose that is something of a coup." Margaret came down to Eastleigh again in 2005; alas, it was not to be, and Chris Huhne won.

Column 1630

In January 2010, in the run-up to the general election, Lady Thatcher came to what turned out to be the last dinner she ever had outside her home or the Ritz. She came to do an event for me and another candidate which we had given the rather novel title "Women, for men to win". Ann Widdecombe was the guest speaker and Margaret was the guest of honour.

In recent years, I spent almost every Sunday evening with Lady Thatcher; on my way to Chester square to see her, I often bumped into you, Mr Speaker, when you were returning from the gym. We had great conversations on those Sundays. They ranged very much depending on how she was on a particular day. If we were in good form, we would go through the papers. I remember last November showing her a poll in *The Sunday Telegraph* that showed the Conservatives 9% behind the Labour party. She asked when the next election was, so I said that there was a little over two years to go. She said, "That's not far enough behind at this stage!" I texted that information to the Prime Minister from the living room of Chester square; I do not know whether it cheered up his Sunday evening at Chequers, but I am sure it reduced my prospects of promotion.

On one occasion, I took a taxi from here to Chester square to see Lady Thatcher on a particularly wet and awful evening. The taxi driver said, "Which end of the square do you want, guv?" I said, "The house with the policeman outside." "Maggie Thatcher's, guv?" "That's right." "What you doin' there, then?" "I'm going to have a drink with her—she's a friend of mine." "What d'you do then?" "I'm a Tory MP." As we pulled up, I went to pay the driver, but he refused to take the fare. I apologise in advance to the Prime Minister for repeating this story, but the driver said, “Your fare tonight, guv, is you go in there and you tell ’er from me that we ain’t had a good’un since!” I imparted that message to Margaret, who looked at me and said, “Well, he’s quite right.” I was then on the receiving end of a lecture about how he probably had a wife and child to support, how I should have paid him and how it was monstrous that I had not.

One of the things we used to talk about was her time in office and some of her remarkable achievements. Quite recently, towards the end of last year, I remember saying to her, “You must have made mistakes.” She said, “I suppose I must have done.” I said, “Can you think of any specific examples?” She replied, “Well, they usually happened when I didn’t get my own way.”

Much has been made in the media about the controversial nature of Margaret Thatcher as a politician and of her premiership. We should not shy away from that today, and nor should we on the Conservative Benches be afraid to talk about that. That would be to betray who she was: she was a robust, principled, confrontational character. Yes, she divided; yes, she pursued her policies with vigour and persistence. She believed, as she said to me, that politics at its purest is philosophy in action. She believed in the battle of ideas—something that we would welcome returning to domestic politics today.

If I may say so to the Deputy Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher was not a Tory at all. In fact, she proudly stated that she was a laissez-faire Gladstonian economic liberal—in the proudest traditions, and I say it as one myself, of the Gladstonian Liberal party. She would have welcomed that.

Column 1631

In some ways, the protests are the greatest compliment that could be paid to Margaret Thatcher. Even in death, the left have to argue against her. She would take great pride in these protests. She would not get angry about them; she would regard them as utterly and completely absurd. All I would say to those engaged in those protests is that they should look at how gracious she always was in what she said whenever her political foes departed the scene—most recently in the statement she issued about Michael Foot.

Her enduring legacy is not just in what she achieved and the fact that the Labour party has not reversed much of it. Her true legacy lies here on these Benches and in those who are coming up behind us. After the 2010 general election, I had the honour of organising a small number of receptions to introduce her to new colleagues. She drew great solace and comfort from the number of those colleagues who told her that they were in Parliament because of her inspiration and because of what she believed and did. Only two years ago, Tony Abbott, as the aspirant Prime Minister of Australia, asked to come to see her and told her that his philosophy was informed by watching what she had done when he was at university. While she was divisive to some degree, controversial certainly, she was an inspiration to many people way beyond these shores.

I would like to end by quoting what she said in the closing pages of the second volume of her memoirs—the last authentic book that she published. She reflected on a visit to Warsaw in 1993 and wrote movingly about attending mass at the Church of the Holy Cross:

“Every nook and cranny was packed and the choral singing of unfamiliar Polish hymns was all the more uplifting because I could not understand the verses: it forced me to try to imagine…what the congregation was asking of God.

Foreign though this experience was, it also gave me a comforting feeling that I was but one soul among many in a fellowship of believers that crossed nations and denominations.

When the priest rose to give the sermon, however, I had the sense that I had suddenly become the centre of attention. Heads turned and people smiled at me. As the priest began, someone translated his words.

He recalled that during the dark days of communism they had been aware of voices from the outside world, offering hope of a different and better life. The voices were many, often eloquent, and all were welcome to a people starved so long of truth as well as freedom.

But Poles had come to identify with one voice in particular—my own. Even when that voice had been relayed through the distorting loud-speaker of the Soviet propaganda, they had heard through the distortions the message of truth and hope.

Well, communism had fallen and a new democratic order had replaced it. But they had not fully felt the change nor truly believed in its reality until today when they finally saw me in their own church.

The priest finished his sermon and the service continued. But the kindness of the priest and the parishioners had not been exhausted. At the end of Mass, I was invited to stand in front of the Altar. When I did so, lines of children presented me with little bouquets while their mothers and fathers applauded.”

Column 1632

The final paragraph of Lady Thatcher’s memoir reads thus:

“Of course no human mind nor any conceivable computer can calculate the sum total of my career in politics in terms of happiness, achievement and virtue, nor indeed their opposites. It follows therefore that the full accounting of how my political work affected the lives of others is something that we will only know on Judgement Day. It is an awesome and unsettling thought. But it comforts me that when I stand up to hear the verdict, I will at least have the people of the Church of the Holy Cross in Warsaw in court as character witnesses.”

3.50pm

Sir Gerald Kaufman >
(Manchester, Gorton) (Lab)

Share

I join in paying tribute to my old adversary, Margaret Thatcher. For many, of course, Margaret Thatcher was synonymous with “milk-snatcher,” and it would be idle to pretend that to us in the Labour party, and to millions of our supporters, many of her policies were other than anathema. But Margaret was much more complex than that, both as a politician and as a person, and her international significance was emphasised quite recently when, almost 24 years after she had stopped being Prime Minister, an actress in Hollywood could win the “best actress” Oscar for portraying her almost as well as she used to portray herself.

I served in the shadow Cabinet for 10 years when Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister. I saw her in action, and I often opposed her in action. After she left office—or rather, was ousted from office by some of her colleagues—I had contact with her from time to time.

Of course, as a Labour Member of Parliament, I deplored many of the drastic changes that she made in society. I was Labour’s Front-Bench spokesman during the coal strike, which she provoked, prepared for and won, although she was greatly helped by the stupid approach of Arthur Scargill, who destroyed the once almost revered National Union of Mineworkers by refusing to hold a strike ballot—a victory for her—just as Michael Foot, who has been mentioned this afternoon, contributed very significantly indeed to her greatest election victory in 1983.

It was my job to oppose her right-to-buy legislation, whose impact on the availability of social housing persists to this day, which is quite a charge sheet, not to mention the blunders that finished her off: the poll tax and “no, no, no” to Europe. But after all, she was a Tory Prime Minister and was not elected to implement policies that I or my constituents favoured. Unlike Winston Churchill, Harold Macmillan or Ted Heath, she broke the post-war consensus; that was her objective, and that was her achievement.

In personal relationships, and in some policy areas, Margaret Thatcher could be more than civilized—indeed, punctilious and cordial. I was a junior Housing Minister when she was shadow Environment Secretary, and I recall an occasion when one of her Front-Bench spokesmen violated the kind of across-the-Floor Front-Bench deal on which the functioning of this House depends. It was Margaret who sought me out to apologise and to say that she knew nothing about it, and would have stopped it had she known.

After she became Prime Minister, she baulked at railway privatisation. It was imposed by John Major, and its messy consequences we suffer to this day. Although she won her second and third elections with enormous majorities, she was always accessible. She announced that any Member of Parliament with employment problems in his or her constituency could come and see her at No. 10, and I availed myself of that offer when a computer multilayer board factory in my constituency was at hazard. We met in the Prime Minister’s study in 10 Downing street and I explained the problem. “But how are we to save it?” she asked. I suggested that it could be taken over by the National Enterprise Board, which had been created by Labour. Kenneth Baker, the junior Minister responsible for this policy area, was present, so she turned to him and asked plaintively, “Kenneth, what did I do with the National Enterprise Board?” I am sorry to say that the factory is now a blood transfusion centre, but, still, she meant well.

Column 1633

Margaret Thatcher was brave. In the parliamentary week following the Brighton bombing, in which terrorists tried to kill her and her entire Cabinet—and British democracy, by seeking to do so—she came here; she was present, bright and perky in the House of Commons, for the Government statement, to which I responded. She was also absolutely right on a considerable number of foreign policy issues. Against timorous nerve-trembling on both sides of the House and attempted international interference, she was utterly determined that the people of the Falkland Islands, who wanted to be British and who still want to be British today, should not be the victims of a fascist dictator. How some Labour Members of Parliament could actually want to water down a response to an aggressive fascist dictator, I could not understand then and I still do not understand today.

When Saddam Hussein seized Kuwait, she was actively part of the preparations to oust him by force. I was shadow Foreign Secretary at this time and had to seek to carry with me our Back Benchers, some of whom were spineless—*[Interruption.]* I am here to try to obtain a consensus. In the debate, I therefore told the House that Labour policy was based not on supporting the United Kingdom Government, but on implementing United Nations Security Council resolutions. She knew what I was up to, and she dug the Foreign Secretary in the ribs with her elbow and smiled a wry smile. She was also much more far-sighted than most United Kingdom Prime Ministers about rightward trends in Israel and in the middle east. When, as shadow Foreign Secretary, I visited Morocco, I was told by the United Kingdom ambassador there that she had given him a direct instruction to approach the leaders of the then substantial Moroccan Jewish community and urge them to exhort the sizeable number of Moroccan Jewish immigrants in Israel to vote Labour—Shimon Peres—in a forthcoming election.

Until her final debacle, she generally found ways of getting her own way. There had been a Lionel Bart musical called “Maggie May” and the saying went, “Others may not, but Maggie may”, and that was very much her watchword. I saw her from time to time after she had left office. On one occasion I attended a social event and when I came in she bustled over to me. I had recently had published in a newspaper an article about protecting children from pornography on TV and videos. She told me how much she admired the article and said, “I carry it with me everywhere in my handbag.” To be part of the contents of Margaret’s handbag—what greater apotheosis could one possibly hope for, Mr Speaker?

Column 1634

3.59pm

Sir Gerald Howarth >
(Aldershot) (Con)

Share

This is a sad day for those of us who were privileged to serve as either officers or, in my case, foot soldiers in Margaret Thatcher's great army, but as the Leader of the Opposition said, in what I thought was a very generous speech, it is also an opportunity for the nation to pause, reflect and recall the extraordinary achievements she secured in just 11 years.

Many of my colleagues are too young to remember what Britain was like when Margaret Thatcher won the 1979 election, but we older ones can remember the rubbish piled up in the streets, corpses being left unburied and industry being held to ransom by the likes of Red Robbo. Britain was basically a basket-case. The then Chancellor of the Exchequer was recalled from an aeroplane at Heathrow to come and answer to the International Monetary Fund.

Margaret Thatcher arrived as a new breed; not just a woman, but, as the Prime Minister said, a conviction politician who was driven by a belief that Britain, and the British people themselves, deserved better. She did not need a focus group to decide what she believed in. She was driven by a set of clear Conservative principles, underpinned by a fundamental belief that it was free enterprise that would deliver the prosperity she so craved for our people in the aftermath of the second world war and the malaise to which the Prime Minister referred.

When I became a shadow Minister in 2002, I received a hand-written note congratulating me and advising me, "Know your facts." In that spirit, I wish to remind the House of a couple of facts. Margaret Thatcher believed in sound money, as the Prime Minister said, and in her time public sector borrowing fell from 4.1% to 1% of GDP. The national debt was cut from 43.6% to 26.7% of GDP. She took on the trade union barons and restored the trade unions to their members. It is interesting to look at the figures: in 1979, 29.8 million days were lost to industrial action, or strikes, but that figure was cut to 2 million by the time she left office, and last year it was fewer than 250,000. Such has been the change that this divisive woman wrought to industrial relations in our country.

She also abolished exchange controls. In about 1972 I went on a demonstration outside the Bank of England —I was running the Society for Individual Freedom at the time—and I held a placard that read, "End Exchange Controls". I did not really understand what it was all about, because I had not yet embarked on my banking career, but I had a vague notion that it was some sort of ghastly second world war regulation. The first thing Geoffrey Howe did after becoming Chancellor of the Exchequer was abolish exchange controls. For those of our young people who do not understand what I am talking about, as I did not then, let me explain. In those days, when we went abroad we were allowed to take 30 quid out of the country, and our passports had to be stamped to show that we were entitled to do so. It is important that we take this opportunity to remind people of the changes that have been wrought. I was working in a bank at the time. I took all the regulations relating to exchange controls off the shelves and have them at home to remind myself, and anybody else who might need to, of the iniquity of exchange controls.

Column 1635

She also ended the party line. I do not mean the line that we are so privileged to receive from central office every morning. Again, I remind those who are a little younger that the party line, which we had at home, meant that a telephone, which was graciously provided by something called the General Post Office, could not be used if a neighbour who shared the line was already using it. I remember in the late 1990s all the smart, Armani-suited new Labour types clutching their mobile phones. Those friends and comrades should not forget that had it not been for us privatising the telecommunications industry, they would not have had their mobile phones. *[Interruption.]* The shadow Chancellor can try to phone a friend, but the trouble is that he has not got one. I am sorry—that was a bit divisive.

We have heard of her other domestic achievements, but of course she did not do everything. I, my right hon. Friends the Members for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr Lilley) and for Wokingham (Mr Redwood) and many others in the No Turning Back group urged her to go further and faster—we were called the "Don't Turn Your Back" group for some obscure reason. I remember that we proposed to her a system in education whereby the money followed the pupil. At an NTB dinner, she told us, "Grow up boys and be your age. We can't possibly do anything like that." We were all crestfallen and went home very disappointed that the Prime Minister had not listened. Come the general election in 1987, we were out canvassing all day long and would turn on the telly at night to see what was going on at the centre. There was the press conference, with the Prime Minister in the middle and Ken Baker to her side. She said, "We've got this new idea about education. The money follows the pupil." That was what we had proposed to her and she had told us to grow up and that we could not possibly do anything like that. That was the art of Margaret Thatcher's political argument, of which the Prime Minister spoke: she challenged people and made sure that they got their facts right. She challenged that proposal and found that it was a policy worth pursuing.

Abroad, of course, she forged that close relationship with Ronald Reagan and the United States. I heard the story that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kensington (Sir Malcolm Rifkind) mentioned about Ronald Reagan from Bob Tuttle, the former American ambassador. It is absolutely right that they really did admire her. She was no poodle of the United States, however. She challenged them and that is what they admired about her.

She ended the cold war and it is terribly important to understand that at that time we all felt a sense of potential nuclear holocaust. Together with Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, she made the world a better place and liberated millions of eastern Europeans who had been subjected to tyranny. This divisive lady was responsible for introducing harmony across the iron curtain.

Her will to recover the Falkland Islands is now legendary and I wear my Falkland Islands tie with pride today as a symbol of Margaret Thatcher's determination.

That extraordinary engendering of a new respect across the world for the United Kingdom had commercial advantage. One of the biggest deals we have ever done was the al-Yamamah defence deal with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which today is worth tens of billions of pounds, sustaining high-tech jobs across the United Kingdom. She played a huge part in that. When she went there, she observed all the courtesies of the Arab world—a long dress, long sleeves and a scarf—but I am quite sure that when she flashed her eyes at King Fahd it was all a done deal.

Column 1636

We have heard about the liberation of Kuwait and the winning of the EU rebate. In the latter case, again, she had a simple message for the country. That was one of her secrets. Members might remember Robin Day interviewed her and gave a great spiel about how her belligerence and her determination to get the rebate would put off our European partners. She paused and said, "But Robin, it's our money. We want it back." To date, we have had £75 billion back, so let no one deny her the pomp and circumstance of next week's funeral.

Of course, she did fall out over Europe, and she did sign the Single European Act, as the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds) mentioned. I did not sign it—I was not a Minister—but I did vote against it on Third Reading. When I became her Parliamentary Private Secretary, I said to her, "A lot of people in the House are saying, Margaret, that your belligerence on Europe is hardly justified when you signed the Single European Act." She said to me, "Yes, I did sign it, but I understood it to apply solely to the single market in goods and services. I was assured that it would not be extended to working time and other areas. The fact that I was betrayed is why I feel so passionately about it."

She was a fervent patriot. She profoundly believed in this country; she loved this country and she did not wish to sign up to a united states of Europe—neither do I, nor do my right hon. and hon. Friends on this side of the House. Of course, we were not alone in that. I remember a conversation in the Lobby that was not seen by any of the media involving me, Mrs Thatcher, as she then was, Tony Benn and the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner). It was absolutely marvellous to hear the entire expression of unity about how evil, as it were, the common market was in the way it was trying to drive a united states of Europe.

Margaret Thatcher lost office and I was her Parliamentary Private Secretary after that. She was angry; people around the world could not understand it and it is important to remember that she was never beaten by the British people. She was never even beaten by the Conservative party—54% of us voted for her, but that was four votes short of the majority required. I think that the Conservative party, and the country, suffered as a consequence of that, and I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on doing all he can to try to revive those Thatcherite principles that did so much to revive our country in the 1980s.

I will tell one wonderful story, and then I will wind up my remarks. I went to see Margaret Thatcher after I lost my seat in Staffordshire in 1992 and asked her, "What are you doing this weekend, Margaret?" She said, "Well, I'm going to Paris. I am going to have dinner with President Mitterrand." I asked, "What are you going to say?", and she said, "I am going to tell him that if France signs the Maastricht treaty, France est mort." I said, "I think actually that it's 'La France'". She said, "Yes. La France est mort." I said, "Well, because it's 'La France', you have to say 'morte'" She went round the room saying, "La France est morte. La France est morte", and that weekend she went off to dinner with President Mitterrand. In my view it is no coincidence that on Monday morning, President Mitterrand announced that France would hold a referendum on the Maastricht treaty. The eyes of Caligula and the mouth of Marilyn Monroe, perhaps.

Column 1637

After losing my seat in 1992 in Cannock and Burntwood, I was told that if I did not distance myself from Margaret Thatcher, I would never get a seat again. However, I had a wonderful letter from Enoch Powell who said, "My Dear Gerald, Hard luck but be of good cheer. Fidelity to persons or to principles is seldom unrewarded." Thank you to the people of Aldershot who rewarded me by offering me the first seat that came up after the 1992 general election, which I think rather worried No. 10 at the time. I have not changed my principles; I have been a supporter of Margaret Thatcher from the very first time she put her name forward to be leader of our party and I do not regret that. I think she has been the salvation of the nation, and that she restored our position in the world.

None of us can forget Margaret Thatcher's extraordinary elegance. I remember coming to the Chamber at about 4 o'clock in the morning during an all-night sitting—none of you lot know what an all-night sitting is about, but we used to have them regularly. It was 4 o'clock in the morning, people had had a bit to drink and, for us chaps, there was a bit of stubble and it was really pretty unpleasant. I was sitting on the Front Bench wondering when this purgatory was going end, and then there was a frisson at the back of the Chair. All of a sudden, in walked the Prime Minister, not a hair out of place, hand bag there, smiling. We sort of slid up the Bench and looked at the Prime Minister, saying, "Here I am." She was an inspiration to us all and she inspired huge loyalty. When I asked Bob Kingston, her personal protection officer, what it was like working for her, he said, "I would catch bullets between my teeth to save that woman."

The soldiers whom Margaret Thatcher so admired reciprocated and admired her. I was at the Painted Hall for the 25th anniversary of the Falklands campaign. A lot of people who had been injured, either mentally or physically, were there. When Margaret Thatcher got up to leave, there was the most astonishing roar from men who had been maimed, cheering their warrior leader who had instructed them to go into battle and they wanted to pay tribute to her.

As people have said, Margaret Thatcher showed immense kindness. In my case, when Neil Hamilton and I faced extinction after we were defamed by the BBC "Panorama" programme, it took a bit of time to see the chairman of the party—who happened to be Norman Tebbit—but only a couple of days to see the Prime Minister. She listened for 25 minutes and at the end she turned to the Chief Whip, John Wakeham, and said, "These are members of our party in good standing. Please ensure that they get the necessary support." We got that support. We won our libel action and the director general of the BBC was fired, and as a result of Margaret Thatcher's kindness, we were able to resume our political careers.

I will close by quoting Enoch Powell, who, at the time of the Falklands campaign, made an interesting observation. Before the campaign, he had said that the Iron Lady would be tested, but on 17 June 1982, he said this to the Prime Minister:

"Is the right hon. Lady aware that the report has now been received from the public analyst on a certain substance recently subjected to analysis and that I have obtained a copy of the report? It shows that the substance under test consisted of ferrous matter of the highest quality, that it is of exceptional tensile strength, is highly resistant to wear and tear and to stress, and may be used with advantage for all national purposes?"—[*Official Report*, 17 June 1982; Vol. 25, c. 1082.]

Column 1638

What advantage the nation had in the leadership of Margaret Thatcher, the greatest peacetime Prime Minister this nation has ever seen. Next week, we will have our opportunity to give her the send-off she so fully deserves for her selfless sacrifice to the nation.

4.15pm

Mr Michael Meacher >
(Oldham West and Royton) (Lab)

Share

I very much endorse the measured and dignified remarks of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition. I should like briefly to add to them in two ways. First and most importantly, I want to be a voice for my constituents, and secondly I want to speak as someone who has been a Member of the House from the very start, when Margaret Thatcher became Conservative party leader, and who was here when she was Prime Minister.

Almost everyone agrees that, in 1979, Britain was set on a course that could not go on. It demanded radical change. At times of deep crisis, the whole country rallies behind a unifying leader, whether it is Churchill in wartime or Attlee in peacetime—the latter constructed a peace that broke with the despair of the 1930s. Mrs Thatcher was a very different kind of leader. She was someone who took the fight to her opponents, and who deployed a scorched earth policy to destroy them. That polarised the country, which is why, even today, she is lionised in the south, as we have heard repeatedly this afternoon, but remembered with a very different memorial in the north.

The task in 1979 certainly required a dominant personality to shake this country out of its somnolent conservatism—all hon. Members agree on that. Whatever else Mrs Thatcher was, she was certainly a dominant figure. She dominated, or came to dominate, her Cabinet, and she dominated her party and the country. Her influence was felt across much of the world.

In that context, I recall a story I recently heard while sharing a platform with my very good friend John Gummer, who is now Lord Deben. When he was Secretary of State for the Environment in the 1980s, he complained that he could not get his Department to take climate change seriously. He rang Mrs Thatcher to ensure that he had the necessary support. When he explained the situation, she said to him, “John, you really shouldn’t worry. There are two persons in the Cabinet who are committed over climate change—you and me, so we are in a majority.”

Dominance, however, should always have a counterpart in concern for the victims of radical change. One should never destroy without then building up again. Too many industries and too many working class communities across the north were laid waste during those years without an alternative and better future being constructed to replace what was lost. Many of those communities are still desolated today.

In Oldham, the textile industry was wiped out, and a swathe of the country’s finest engineering companies were simply swept away. Yes, Labour Members agree that change, and even painful change, is often necessary, but we also believe that it should not be bought at the price of tripling unemployment, tripling child poverty and an unacceptable increase in inequality, which is still with us today.

Column 1639

My office in Oldham has received dozens of phone calls and e-mails on this matter from my constituents, as I am sure have the offices of many other Members. I will quote the exact words of one e-mail:

“Despite what her supporters think, a lot of today’s problems result from her policies…the destruction of our manufacturing base, lack of investment in social housing following the sale of council homes, deregulating the banking industry, privatised industries profiteering at our expense. We are still living with the consequences.”

My constituent went on:

“I’m sure a large percentage of the population who lived through her years in power will feel the same”.

She ended:

“I hope that my views will be represented in Parliament”.

Lady Thatcher will undoubtedly be remembered as a leader of great conviction. However, in my view, greatness has to be tempered with generosity and magnanimity if one is to earn a permanent place in the heart of this nation. I conclude by saying simply that the unwavering conviction that Lady Thatcher possessed so magnificently sets an example for every generation in confronting the problems that challenge them. This generation is confronted by very different problems: the straitjacket of prolonged austerity, the lack of accountability in corporate power, the over-dominance of finance, a grossly unjust system of remuneration and the destruction of the public realm. I say genuinely and forcefully that it is to Lady Thatcher’s credit that she has shown that we should not be daunted by problems of that scale and magnitude, but should tackle them head-on and overcome them with the same flame of conviction and resolution that remains her greatest memorial.

4.22pm

Mrs Cheryl Gillan
(Chesham and Amersham) (Con)

Share

The legion of tributes today, the international response and even the distasteful celebrations of her sad death mark out Margaret Thatcher from all other politicians in this country. The remarkable fact that she was only the second woman on the Conservative Benches to serve at Cabinet level makes her achievements even more impressive.

Margaret Thatcher was a woman of great contrasts. It may be said that she bestrode the world stage like a colossus, but she was also capable of great empathy and compassion. She was not only a politician, but proud of her role as daughter, wife, mother and grandmother. Our thoughts in this House should be with her family and close relatives today.

I came into this House just as Margaret Thatcher left, so it is a great sadness that I never got to serve on these green Benches alongside her. For me, she was a cross between my mother and my headmistress. She was a woman to be loved and admired, but also to be feared. She was a woman to hold up as an example for others, but who would expect people to follow her.

For someone with a reputation of wanting to be the only woman in the Cabinet room, I found Margaret Thatcher both inspiring and personally encouraging to other women, particularly those who wanted to enter politics. As a direct result of her comments to me back in 1979, when I sat next to her at a dinner, I believed that I, too, could serve my country as an MP. From some of the speeches that we have heard today and from some that will follow, we will know that she had that effect on many people and empowered them to achieve their potential.

Column 1640

It was Margaret Thatcher's clearly defined philosophy and stubborn adherence to her own beliefs that fashioned the opinions both of her admirers and her detractors. My predecessor in Chesham and Amersham was one such detractor—he entitled his book on the Thatcher years "Dancing with Dogma", to reflect her often intractable views and approach—but even he praised her attention to detail and her mastery of the brief, while perhaps not admiring her footwork on the political dance floor.

Although, almost unbelievably, she had moments of self-doubt, she reserved those for the private arena, mostly to be shared with her devoted and doted-on Denis. On public platforms she always appeared sure-footed, and brave with it.

Politics takes no prisoner, man or woman, and being Prime Minister is no sinecure. I think that, as an individual, she was braver than many men. She took on the vested interests, the dictators and the misogynists, and triumphed. She engineered the end of a cold war, and, against all odds, won a distant one; she curtailed the powers of the unelected unions, and restored it to elected representatives; she removed the dead hand of the state from enterprise, and helped people to improve their lot and their lives through hard work and home ownership; and she established the United Kingdom's ground, quite clearly and uniquely, in a Europe that had its own grandiose ambitions to usurp our British sovereignty. Any one of those feats would have been enough to mark out an individual, but they, and many more, reflect a politician of substance whose like we may not see again in our lifetimes.

She will be missed in very many different ways by all who knew her, but especially by those who received her encouragement, kindness and protection. She has left an indelible impression on this country and on countries abroad, and on all future generations.

4.26pm

Ms Diane Abbott >
(Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab)

Share

I am very glad to have an opportunity to speak in this historic debate. It would be wrong not to pay tribute to Britain's first woman Prime Minister.

I entered Parliament in 1987, when Mrs Thatcher was still Prime Minister in all her pomp and glory, and it is fair to say that she was a remarkable parliamentary phenomenon. She believed in Parliament as the cockpit of political debate, in a way that is perhaps not fashionable today, and she was often the leading lady—whether we agreed with her or not—in some of Parliament's most momentous occasions.

The House will not be surprised to hear that I did not agree with many of the things for which she stood. However, I rose this afternoon not to challenge her beliefs, but to remind the House very gently that, even after all the years that have passed since she stood down as leader of her party, there are still millions of people who felt themselves to be on the wrong side of the titanic battles that she fought. Whether they are people who felt that the poll tax had been imposed on them wrongly, whether they are young people who were caught up in the difficult relationships between police and communities in our inner cities, whether they are people who were dismayed by her unwillingness to impose economic sanctions on South Africa and by her insistence on calling the African National Congress a terrorist organisation, or whether they are people—and I mean communities—who were caught up in the miners' strike, there are still people living today who felt themselves to be on the wrong side of those titanic struggles, and the House should not make it appear that their voice cannot be heard.

Column 1641

Many Members from mining communities are present today, and they will have their say, but let me quote from another Conservative leader, Harold Macmillan. In his first speech in the House of Lords as Lord Stockton, he said:

"Although…I cannot interfere…it breaks my heart to see what is happening in our country today. A terrible strike is being carried on by the best men in the world. They beat the Kaiser's army and they beat Hitler's army. They never gave in."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 13 November 1984; Vol. 457, c. 240.]

Whatever the rights and wrongs of the titanic political struggles that she fought—Conservative Members have spoken about them at length—let us remember that in their hearts some of those communities never gave in and deserve to have a voice in the House this afternoon. I am happy to pay tribute to her historic significance and her historic role, and I know that history is written by victors, but those of us who came of age in the Thatcher era know that there was another side to the glories that Government Members have spoken about.

4.30pm

Sir Tony Baldry
(Banbury) (Con)

Share

I first met Margaret Thatcher when she was Secretary of State for Education and I was a student at Sussex university who was active in student politics. From that, I became Margaret Thatcher's personal aide and research assistant in the October 1974 general election. The Conservative party was in opposition and Margaret was a member of the shadow Cabinet as shadow housing and planning Minister. In those days, Members of Parliament did not have numbers of research assistants—they had just a single House of Commons secretary—so the core campaign team in Finchley was small: Mrs Thatcher's secretary, Alison Ward, now Lady Wakeham, her agent and me. What struck me first about working for Margaret Thatcher was her prodigious work ethic, her indefatigable determination to analyse and understand any brief that she was given and the considerable attention she paid to the last detail. I think that that was helped by the combination of her training both as a research chemist and, for a while, an extremely able junior at the tax Bar.

Working for Margaret and producing research briefings for her, I knew that I had to be ready and able to deal with any of the supplementary questions that she might ask—or, at the very least, know who could provide those detailed answers. The simple fact was that at any meeting—I suspect that this was the case throughout her time as leader of the party and as Prime Minister—Margaret was always the best-prepared person in the room, because invariably she had taken the time and effort to ensure that she was the best briefed.

Column 1642

When writing speeches for Margaret in the October 1974 general election, we used two books for primary source material. The first, which has already been mentioned, was F. A. Hayek's "The Constitution of Liberty", and the other was a book written and published in the 1930s called "A Time for Greatness". To my shame, I cannot now remember the author's name, but I well recall that Margaret's reflection of these two books was along these lines: if the state takes all in taxation and spends all, we all become slaves of the state.

Margaret Thatcher was also incredibly kind, particularly to those who worked for her. Of course, she revelled in the Iron Lady sobriquet given to her by the Russians and others—it was a badge of respect for her steadfastness and determination—but there was also a much softer and more caring side to her. Perhaps I can give one example with which I think every Member could empathise. One of my intake, Patrick Nicholls, was a very effective junior Minister, but had had to resign from office following a road traffic offence. Not surprisingly, he was cross with himself and very frustrated, and thought he had let people down.

One evening, Patrick had a telephone call from his Whip, telling him to be in the Division Lobby at five to 10, shortly before the 10 o'clock vote. Patrick asked why and was told simply to be there. Patrick arrived, as instructed, at five to 10, and shortly afterwards Margaret Thatcher walked in, put her arm through his and said, "How are things going, Patrick? How are you?" As the Division bell rang and as the Lobby filled with parliamentary colleagues, the Prime Minister slowly walked through the Lobby, arm in arm with Patrick, chatting to him all the way—a kind and clear gesture of support for someone who had been a hard-working junior Minister and who continued to be an extremely hard-working and loyal Back Bencher.

Margaret also had a great sense of humour. In the 1983 general election, another of our intake, Jeremy Hanley, won Richmond with a majority of just 74 votes. The day after the general election, Margaret, the Prime Minister, telephoned Jeremy to congratulate him on winning Richmond. The Conservative vote in the constituency had been about 21,000. The conversation went like this. Jeremy: "Thank you very much, Prime Minister, for getting me the 74 votes that I needed." Prime Minister: "Jeremy, I got you the 21,000 votes—you just got the 74." Indeed, I often think there were two Margaret Thatchers: the real Margaret Thatcher for those who knew and worked with her and the caricature Margaret Thatcher of some press commentators, satirists and political opponents.

During the winter of 1974-75, I gave some help to Airey Neave in the Conservative leadership campaign. When Margaret became leader of the Conservative party, I joined her private office for a while as the personal link between her and the Britain in Europe campaign that was going on as a consequence of the EU referendum. I therefore had a good opportunity to see how Margaret worked, in the early part of her leadership, with parliamentary colleagues and advisers. Yes, Margaret Thatcher was certainly a person of robust views. She liked a good discussion—robust argument, even—but she was always willing to listen and heed the views of others. There were, I suspect, countless occasions when having heard the arguments—having heard the advice of Willie Whitelaw, or, on more personal matters, heeded the good counsel of Denis—Margaret would accept other people's contributions and advice, perhaps saying something like, "All right, we'll do it your way, but you had better get it right."

Column 1643

It is also a caricature to portray Margaret Thatcher as simply anti-European. I have in my desk at home the originals of a number of speeches that she gave in her constituency and elsewhere during the 1975 EU referendum campaign—speeches clearly amended and corrected in her own very distinctive cursive handwriting. Margaret campaigned wholeheartedly for a "yes to Europe" result in the referendum. As those speeches demonstrate, she clearly believed in a strong Europe being a counterweight to the then Soviet Union and a strong partner to the United States. She clearly undoubtedly believed in a Europe of nation states. She strongly believed in ensuring the speediest possible creation of the European single market and was always extremely frustrated by other member states that sought to frustrate the further creation of a single market for their own particular nationalist interests.

Ironically, I think that this is where her frustration may have started with some of the workings of the European Union. Prior to the Single European Act in the mid-1980s, every EU member state had, in effect, a veto on any issue of any importance. This meant that the EU Commission or the President of the Council of Ministers, when wishing to get business through had, importantly, to negotiate with and square any member states that they thought would veto a particular proposal. That meant that any single member state could veto advances in the single market. It was therefore decided, in the Single European Act, to move to a system of weighted qualified majority voting. This, overnight, fundamentally changed the way in which the Council of Ministers and the Commission worked, because now all they needed to do was to secure the support of sufficient member states to get a majority vote. They would therefore start with the member states they considered the most supportive of a proposal and work on them until they got a qualified majority, and if, at the end, there were some member states on the other side of the argument, they were not necessarily particularly concerned. This change meant that while Margaret had succeeded in making the single market work much better, she was no longer able as easily to threaten to exercise a UK veto, and I think in time she found that very frustrating.

I felt enormously privileged to have been appointed even a junior Minister in a Government led by Margaret Thatcher. I was sent to the Department of Energy to help support John Wakeham with electricity privatisation. With the clarity and grip that she had had way back when I first worked for her in 1974, she explained clearly and succinctly exactly what she expected the Department to achieve in respect of not just electricity privatisation, but the future of the coal industry and nuclear power.

Now, there are those who say that Margaret was divisive. To them I would simply observe that Margaret Thatcher was a democrat, and a democrat who won three general elections in a row with increased majorities. I was elected in 1983 when Margaret secured a majority of 144 in the Commons. I do not think any of us who were elected in June 1983 were in any doubt that we owed our election to Margaret Thatcher and the affection in which she was held by huge numbers of voters. This, for me, is best recalled in a single soundbite in Banbury market. One of the television stations had come to do some vox pop on the election in Banbury. They went up to a chap who ran the fruit and veg stall. "What do you think about the general election?" they asked. "I don't know much about politics," said the guy, "but this I do know: No. 10—Maggie's den."

Column 1644

It was very cruel that Margaret Thatcher should have been so unwell for the last years of her life. I first realised that something was not quite right a number of years ago when Margaret was speaking at a fundraising dinner for Somerville college. Lady Thatcher, as she then was, was making a bravura speech, clearly setting out the thoughts and principles that had guided her throughout public life, but she was finding it difficult to bring the speech to a conclusion. I suspect that those of us there who knew her must have suspected that all was not well, and so it sadly proved to be. In passing, it is important to recall how proud Margaret was of having been made an honorary fellow of Somerville, the college which had set her on the path to becoming the UK's first woman Prime Minister, and also how sad she was that she was never awarded an honorary degree by Oxford.

It is all ancient history and in many ways water under the bridge, but as an Oxfordshire MP I always thought it reflected badly on the image and reputation of Oxford university that it had not felt able to recognise Margaret's unquestionable and outstanding achievements in politics and public life. Somerville established a number of fellowships in law and chemistry in honour of Margaret Thatcher, and I suspect that if anyone wanted to make a bequest in Margaret's memory, Somerville is one of the institutions that she would want to see flourish.

Margaret is now at peace and, I am confident, reunited with Denis who, notwithstanding the *Private Eye* caricature, was a man of good counsel and sound judgment, and a towering column of support and strength for Margaret, a thoroughly decent man. If I were allowed just one image or one memory of Margaret, it would be standing in the Winter Gardens in Blackpool in the 1980 Conservative party conference, listening to her conference speech when she said electrically,

"I have only one thing to say. You turn if you want to. The lady's not for turning."

4.43pm

Mr David Winnick
(Walsall North) (Lab)

Share

I do not doubt for one moment that Lady Thatcher was kind and considerate in her dealings with those who worked for her. Indeed, I would be surprised if that were not the position. No doubt some of her Cabinet colleagues would have appreciated, at least in the later stages, the same consideration. However, it would be wrong and hypocritical if the views that we expressed at the time—strong views about the policies pursued by Mrs Thatcher's Government from 1979 to when she left office—were not mentioned today.

It is right and understandable that those who support her have spoken and will, I am sure, continue to speak in this debate, but the House is a place where opinion should be expressed freely, even if it is controversial, and those of us who so strongly disagreed with the policies pursued by Lady Thatcher should make our views clear today. It is more political than personal. Of course I regret, like everyone else, the passing of Lady Thatcher. I recognise that by becoming the first female Prime Minister in Britain, she made history, and that cannot be disputed. However, we have to remember what was done during the 11 years—or, to be exact, as she always was, the 11 and a half years—of her premiership in No. 10 Downing street and the way in which those policies were carried out. It was my view, and that of those on the Opposition Benches at the time, that those policies were highly damaging and that they caused immense pain and suffering to ordinary people.

Column 1645

I therefore believe that it is right that, while tributes are being paid to the life of Lady Thatcher, we should not forget what happened at that time. Those of us who were here in the House of Commons used every opportunity to protest on behalf of our constituents who were the victims of those policies, and we were not wrong to do so. This is not so much about Lady Thatcher herself as about the way in which, once the election had been won in 1979, it was decided to pursue policies that almost immediately—certainly within a year or two—caused the outcomes that I have mentioned.

In April to June 1979, the rate of unemployment was just over 5%. In March to May 1984, it was just under 12% and well over 3 million. Those are the percentages, but what did they mean in human terms for the men and women who were made redundant? As we said at the time, many of those people had worked all their lives since leaving school. When they were made redundant in their 50s, they discovered how unlikely it was that they would ever work again. We have to understand the human cost of the policies that have been praised today.

In 1979, 14% of children lived in relative poverty—that was bad enough; the fact that any children were living in poverty was to be deplored—but by 1991, 31% lived in such poverty. Are we really saying that those policies that Conservative Members have been praising today were unrelated to those children living in such poverty and deprivation? The fact that they were living in those conditions should certainly be deplored by Opposition Members.

I have heard it argued many times, not least today, that the policies undertaken by the Thatcher Government were almost inevitable, and that whoever had formed the Government of the day would have had to pursue policies of deindustrialisation involving the closing of factories, foundries and coal mines. But even if we accept that some of that was inevitable, the unfortunate thing was what I can only describe as the indifference to and, at times, brutal contempt for, those who had lost their jobs.

David Morris >
(Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con)

Share

Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Winnick >

Share

In a moment.

It almost seemed that, instead of offering support and understanding what that meant to the many people involved, the Government of the day blamed those people who were made redundant. It was as though it was their fault, and it was suggested that if only they had got on their bikes, as Lord Tebbit said his dad had done, they would have found work. That is what I mean by indifference and brutal contempt for people who, through no fault of their own, found themselves in circumstances that none of us would want. Does the hon. Gentleman still wish to intervene on me?

David Morris >

Share

Column 1646

I note that the hon. Gentleman would not give way to me a moment ago. I was made redundant at the time he was describing. I set up my own business thanks to Thatcherism, I made a success of it and here I am now, preaching it forward.

Mr Winnick >

Share

Does that not prove the point? So many people were not in a position to do what the hon. Gentleman did. What he said very much expresses Thatcherism. He says, "I was made redundant. I found another job. Here I am today." What about all the others who were not in a position to do that? What about all the others I have mentioned––those in their 50s, who were never able to work again because, as they grew older, employers said that they were too near retirement age? My point could not be better illustrated, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for doing it.

In the black country and the west midlands, we were devastated by the two major recessions that occurred during the 1980s. My hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) referred to the terrible hardship suffered by mining communities. Many of us believe that the miners were treated with utter contempt. However much it could be said that Arthur Scargill played into Lady Thatcher's hands, the manner in which the miners were treated is not likely to be forgotten by the communities involved. It is right and proper that that is said today, when tributes are being paid to the former Prime Minister.

Let me also just say this: mention was made, by the Prime Minister and others, of the fact that Lady Thatcher had a commitment to parliamentary democracy. I do not doubt that for one moment. She was long a Member of this House—32 years—and then went to the House of Lords, where she played an active role. It could be said that a certain Mr Gorbachev had a role to play in what happened in eastern Europe by the manner in which he made it perfectly clear, particularly to the East Germans, that the Russians would no longer, in any circumstances, bolster regimes that were totally discredited.

I do not want to dispute in any way the extent to which Lady Thatcher made a contribution in relation to eastern Europe. However, it is unfortunate, is it not, that she was so totally unsympathetic to the fight against apartheid in South Africa. To describe the African National Congress as a terrorist organisation and Nelson Mandela as a terrorist cannot be justified under any circumstances. I remember when Nelson Mandela came to Westminster Hall as a very distinguished visitor––as President of South Africa. We paid tribute to him and listened keenly to what he said. I could not but notice that in the front row listening to him was Lady Thatcher. I hope that by then she had realised that she had taken the wrong line on apartheid. We should not be concerned about freedom just in Europe, but in South Africa and Latin America. I was never a fan of Pinochet, a professional mass murderer.

Lady Thatcher was a divisive figure, and she would not for one moment have argued otherwise. One thing on which we can agree in this House is that "consensus" was not her favourite word. The Prime Minister mentioned former Prime Ministers. Of the two Prime Ministers who have made the greatest impression since 1945, in my view, and in the view of those on the Opposition Benches, Clement Attlee's tremendous changes —the national health service, national insurance and the like—made Britain a far more civilised country. The other figure, to whom we are paying tribute today, is Lady Thatcher. She believed that much of what occurred post-1945 was wrong and should be undermined. My view remains that what the Attlee Government set out to do was absolutely right, and that what Lady Thatcher set out to do—undermine many of the changes brought about immediately after the second world war—was wrong. I know which side I am on.

Column 1647

4.54pm

Mr John Whittingdale
(Maldon) (Con)

Share

Today, the House of Commons rightly pays tribute to a great Prime Minister and a great parliamentarian. We who sit as Conservative Members of Parliament salute one of the most successful and influential leaders of our party. Those of us who were privileged enough to know her and to work for her remember an inspiring figure, but also a warm and compassionate person who inspired tremendous loyalty among her staff.

I was 15 when Margaret Thatcher became leader of my party and like so many of my generation and those that followed, I was influenced in my politically formative years by her exposition of ideas and beliefs developed with Keith Joseph and the Centre for Policy Studies. That clear articulation of an ideological philosophy attracted me to become involved in Conservative politics. Three years later, I was lucky enough to meet her for the first time when I began to work for the Conservative party. I was in her office on the day Airey Neave was killed, and some years later I was working for her in Downing street on the day that Ian Gow was assassinated —two terrible blows to her personally.

Margaret Thatcher was a controversial and sometimes divisive figure. It was inevitable given the scale of the challenges she and her Government faced. She had to make difficult and unpopular decisions, but her conviction and strength of purpose enabled her to achieve what she did, often in the face of enormous opposition. She confronted opposition right from the start of her career. The Leader of the Opposition referred to her time at Oxford. She became active in the Oxford University Conservative Association––indeed, its president––because women were not allowed to participate in the Oxford Union. Once she became leader of our party, she confronted huge opposition within our own ranks. Many people resented her background, from a middle-class family in Grantham; they resented her sex and they also resented her ideological certainty. All those things were novel for the Conservative party at that time.

Lady Thatcher's strength of purpose allowed her to confront our country's enemies. We have referred to General Galtieri and the invasion of the Falkland Islands. She played a role in persuading George Bush that she must confront Saddam Hussein when he invaded and occupied Kuwait, and, with Ronald Reagan and Gorbachev, in bringing about the end of communism. She was also a pragmatist and a realist. She was responsible for the Lancaster House agreement, which ended white rule in Rhodesia and ushered in black majority government. She negotiated the hand-back of Hong Kong to the Chinese, and as we have heard, she signed the Anglo-Irish agreement.

I first worked for Margaret Thatcher directly during the two general election campaigns of 1983 and 1987 when I accompanied her on her tour of the country. It was my first experience of her punishing work load, her extraordinary attention to detail and her occasionally somewhat unreasonable demands. I also saw at first hand her instinctive feel for the aspirations and beliefs of the people of Britain. It was her identification with those people that allowed her to articulate so clearly what they wanted and that delivered successive general election majorities for the Conservative party of 144 and 102—some of us might think that those were the days.

Column 1648

In 1988, Margaret Thatcher asked me to become her political secretary in Downing street. I saw then her huge respect for Parliament itself. She occupied the position of Prime Minister, but she never forgot that she was also the Member of Parliament for Finchley and she believed that it was her duty to come here not just to speak but to vote—to go through the Division Lobby on behalf of her constituents. I used to help her with preparation for Prime Minister's questions, which in those days lasted for just 15 minutes and took place twice a week. She used to spend six or seven hours preparing for that 15-minute session. We used to go through briefs from every Department across Whitehall, which set out the exposition of the Government's policy and the line to take. Sometimes, she did not think it was very good and I would be sent to ring the Minister's private secretary to tell him that the Prime Minister did not like a particular line. Occasionally, she strode across the study, took the phone from my hand and told the private secretary that not only did she not like the line to take but that she did not even like the policy either. Every now and again, she had a remarkable ability to distance herself somehow from the policies of the Government of which she was also leader.

I would like to set right one or two misconceptions. I listened carefully to the hon. Member for Walsall North (Mr Winnick). Although Margaret Thatcher opposed economic sanctions against South Africa, she fiercely opposed apartheid. She argued with the South African Government that they should release Nelson Mandela from prison; that was recognised by Nelson Mandela, if not by the hon. Gentleman.

I would also say to the leader of the Liberal Democrats, who I am sorry to say is no longer here, that, yes, Margaret Thatcher did say that there was no such thing as society, but she went on to say that there are families and communities. She set out the fact that if individuals see people less well off or in need, they bear a personal and moral responsibility not just to let society—some amorphous body—take responsibility, but to act themselves. People claiming now that she said that there was no such thing as society is an appalling twisting of her message.

I also saw at first hand her immense personal kindness and compassion. As has been said, those were often shown to the most junior members of her staff. On the famous occasion when the waitress spilt the soup on Geoffrey Howe, it was not Geoffrey Howe whom Margaret Thatcher worried about, but the waitress. She always insisted that she could never be late—particularly to funerals, to which, sadly, I used to accompany her occasionally. We used to sit in lay-bys for 15 or 20 minutes; we would have set off early in case there was heavy traffic because she could not allow herself to be late.

I know that both Government and Opposition Members received personal handwritten letters from Margaret Thatcher when they experienced a tragedy in their private lives or with their families. She had enormous compassion. If ever she found out that somebody was alone at Christmas, she would always say that they should come and spend it at Chequers with her. Ronnie Millar, the playwright, told me that he would spend many months trying to think of excuses why he would be busy, because being with Margaret Thatcher at Christmas might not be the most relaxing way to spend it.

Column 1649

After Margaret stood down as Prime Minister, she came on several occasions to support me in Essex. Essex has always been Thatcher country. When she came to my constituency of Maldon at the election in which I first stood as candidate, after she had stood down as Prime Minister, the pavements had crowds four or five deep of people who had turned out to see her. Not all were supporters of hers or of mine, but they wanted to be there because they recognised that she played such a hugely important role in their lives and the life of their country.

Even today, when I occasionally meet parliamentarians, and sometimes even leaders, from different countries, if I say to them that I served as Margaret Thatcher's political secretary, that lights their interest; in many ways, it is what I am most proud of. It was a privilege to know her and an even greater privilege to have worked for someone who was one of the greatest Prime Ministers this country has ever had.

5.03pm

Glenda Jackson >
(Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab)

Share

It is hardly a surprise that Baroness Thatcher was careless over the soup being poured over Lord Howe, given that she was perfectly prepared to send him out to the wicket with a broken bat.

When I made my maiden speech in this Chamber, a little over two decades ago, Margaret Thatcher had been elevated to the other place but Thatcherism was still wreaking, and had wrought for the previous decade, the most heinous social, economic and spiritual damage upon this country, upon my constituency and upon my constituents. Our local hospitals were running on empty. Patients were staying on trolleys in corridors. I tremble to think what the death rate among pensioners would have been this winter if that version of Thatcherism had been fully up and running this year. Our schools, parents, teachers, governors, even pupils, seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time fundraising in order to be able to provide basic materials such as paper and pencils. The plaster on our classroom walls was kept in place by pupils' art work and miles and miles of sellotape. Our school libraries were dominated by empty shelves and very few books; the books that were there were held together by the ubiquitous sellotape, and off-cuts from teachers' wallpaper were used to bind those volumes so that they could at least hang together.

By far the most dramatic and heinous demonstration of Thatcherism was certainly seen not only in London, but across the whole country in metropolitan areas where every single night, every single shop doorway became the bedroom, the living room and the bathroom for the homeless. They grew in their thousands, and many of those homeless people had been thrown out on to the streets as a result of the closure of the long-term mental hospitals. We were told it was going to be called —it was called—"care in the community", but what it was in effect was no care in the community at all.

Column 1650

I was interested to hear about Baroness Thatcher's willingness to invite those who had nowhere to go for Christmas; it is a pity that she did not start building more and more social housing, after she entered into the right to buy, so that there might have been fewer homeless people than there were. As a friend of mine said, during her era, London became a city that Hogarth would have recognised—and, indeed, he would.

In coming to the basis of Thatcherism, I come to the spiritual part of what I regard as the desperately wrong track down which Thatcherism took this country. We were told that everything I had been taught to regard as a vice—and I still regard them as vices—was, in fact, under Thatcherism, a virtue: greed, selfishness, no care for the weaker, sharp elbows, sharp knees, all these were the way forward. We have heard much, and will continue to hear over next week, about the barriers that were broken down by Thatcherism, the establishment that was destroyed.

What we have heard, with the words circling around like stars, is that Thatcher created an aspirational society. It aspired for things. One former Prime Minister who had himself been elevated to the House of Lords, spoke about selling off the family silver and people knowing in those years the price of everything and the value of nothing. What concerns me is that I am beginning to see what might be the re-emergence of that total traducing of what I regard as the spiritual basis of this country where we do care about society, where we do believe in communities, where we do not leave people and walk by on the other side. That is not happening now, but if we go back to the heyday of that era, I fear that we will see replicated yet again the extraordinary human damage from which we as a nation have suffered and the talent that has been totally wasted because of the inability genuinely to see the individual value of every single human being.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) referred to the fact that although she had differed from Lady Thatcher in her policies, she felt duty bound to come here to pay tribute to the first woman Prime Minister this country had produced. I am of a generation that was raised by women, as the men had all gone to war to defend our freedoms. They did not just run a Government; they ran a country. The women whom I knew, who raised me and millions of people like me, who ran our factories and our businesses, and who put out the fires when the bombs dropped, would not have recognised their definition of womanliness as incorporating an iconic model of Margaret Thatcher. To pay tribute to the first Prime Minister denoted by female gender, okay; but a woman? Not on my terms.

Sir Tony Baldry >

Share

On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The conventions of the House in respect of those rare occasions on which the House chooses to make tributes to a person who is deceased are well established. This is not, and has never been, a general debate on the memory of the person who is deceased, but an opportunity for tributes. It is not an opportunity for hon. Members to denigrate the memory of the person .

Mr Speaker

The hon. Gentleman will resume his seat. I am grateful to him for his—I use the term advisedly —attempted point of order. Let me be explicit for the benefit both of the hon. Gentleman and of the House. All hon. and right hon. Members take responsibility for what they say in this place. The responsibility of the Chair is to ensure that nothing unparliamentary occurs. Let me assure the hon. Gentleman, for the avoidance of doubt, that nothing unparliamentary has occurred. We are debating a motion that says that this House has considered the matter of tributes to the Baroness Thatcher. That is what we are doing, and nothing has got in the way of that.

Column 1651

5.11pm

Mr Graham Brady
(Altrincham and Sale West) (Con)

Thank you for your advice, Mr Speaker. We have had some warm and dignified tributes from both sides of the House, led admirably by the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. I hope that we can now return to tributes in that spirit.

Briefly, I want to pay tribute in three different ways. As chairman of the 1922 committee, I want to pay tribute on behalf of Conservative Back Benchers present and past, although I note from the number of colleagues who are standing to make their own contributions that they may well speak for themselves in due course. Like many others, I want to pay a personal tribute. I also want to pay tribute especially as a northern Conservative MP, who now represents the constituency in which I grew up in the 1980s, perhaps answering and responding to the points that were made by the right hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Mr Meacher).

On behalf of the 1922 committee, I pay tribute to a leader and Prime Minister who achieved so much—three stunning election victories; turning around a moribund economy; ending decades of decline. She restored our national pride—from being the sick man of Europe, only good at making jokes about ourselves, which I remember as a boy.

I pay tribute to Margaret Thatcher for the inspirational leadership that she gave to the Conservative party; for inspiring Conservative supporters around the country; and most of all, for inspiring millions of people who had never before realised that they were Conservatives. Lady Thatcher's strength, conviction, patriotism and clarity won her the respect of friends and fair-minded critics alike. Perhaps most remarkable was her popularity not only in this country but overseas, and the lasting legacy of freedom, democracy and prosperity, which we have heard about from many colleagues, that she leaves as a leader who helped to win the cold war and who inspired the people of eastern Europe to fight for their own freedom. Her legacy in this country and beyond will always be remembered with pride by our party.

As with so many hon. Members of my age, my tribute is also intensely personal. Growing up under Margaret Thatcher's governance, it was impossible to be agnostic about politics. Her message was one of opportunity. Whatever your background, you could progress by merit and hard work. Had I not taken that message to heart, I, like so many other Conservative Members—and perhaps, from a different perspective, like quite a few Opposition Members—would not be here in Parliament today.

The last part of my brief tribute to Lady Thatcher is that of a northern Member of Parliament, and it is to address a myth that is in danger of taking hold. My hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) addressed some other myths that have been spread recently. It is true that the restructuring of our economy in the early 1980s hit parts of the north hard, because a concentration of heavy industry and mining had become uncompetitive and uneconomic, but many metropolitan journalists fall into peddling an easy fallacy, suggesting that the north was uniformly hostile to the message of Lady Thatcher—we were not. Many Labour Members will recall that the seats they now represent returned Conservative Members who supported Margaret Thatcher's strong defence, modernisation of the economy, determination to extend opportunity, and spreading of wealth and home ownership to their constituents. Many of those seats across the north returned Labour Members only after Tony Blair embraced the free market, low-tax message of Margaret Thatcher.

Column 1652

We are here to remember a truly remarkable lady, who influenced all our lives, transformed our country and helped to bring freedom to others, and who most of all was unwavering in doing what she believed to be right. We should honour her memory.

5.16pm

Mr Frank Field
(Birkenhead) (Lab)

David Sheppard was a left-wing Bishop of Liverpool, who was much admired and also loved. In one volume of his autobiography, he recalls his meetings with Mrs Thatcher—or, rather, the lead-up to those meetings. He recalls the state he would be in—the feeling of illness as the dreaded hour approached. On one occasion, I asked her, a year before she would appoint a new archbishop, whether she would appoint David Sheppard if his name was one of the two on the list that came to her from the royal commission. Her reply was immediate: "Yes, of course." I was slightly staggered by that response, so I asked why. She said, "He always tells me to my face what he thinks and we always have a good argument." It therefore seems proper that in the tributes we pay to this extraordinary person we should follow her example and not be frightened of argument or even of division—we mock her if we are frightened of that.

The Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition made powerful speeches about the way in which Mrs Thatcher has shaped the world in which all of us live, and I would just extend that in two ways. The world in which all of us and all of our constituents live has been shaped by Clement Attlee and Margaret Thatcher. The danger for both those people, who brought an ideology into politics and saw it operated, was that some of their supporters might think that just preaching the ideology was enough, rather than also responding to what the real world was teaching them. The right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr Redwood) talked about the sale of council houses—all of us in this debate sometimes give a slant to history. There were people in the Labour party who also wanted to sell council houses, and the record shows that both the Wilson and Callaghan Governments looked at the idea—the problem was that the civil servants told them that it was not doable. So one of the lessons about Mrs Thatcher is that one should not necessarily take the advice of the civil service if one actually wants to see radical policies.

However, Mrs Thatcher was not uncritical of her own record. On one occasion I asked her, "Mrs T, what was your greatest disappointment in government?" Again as though she had thought long and hard beforehand about it, she said, "I cut taxes and I thought we would get a giving society, and we haven't." She thought we would, by low taxation, see that extraordinary culture in America whereby people make fortunes and want, perhaps publicly, to declare what they are doing with them. That had not taken root here. I think we should look critically at her record. Of course, it is wrong of us to assume we know what Mrs T would be saying if she were listening to this debate, but I think she would want us to get on to what the differences were and how we take the debate forward.

Column 1653

I want to mention three areas where we are still grappling with her legacy, and with which Members on both Front Benches have not managed to come to terms. First, there is the great question of riches. She was not satisfied with the results of her Government, so should we be? Secondly, despite all the gains that the market economy has given this country, there are clearly some areas—part of my constituency is one of them—that its powers cannot reach. We have not come up with policies that can move those areas back to full employment. How do we raise demand in those areas specifically, and how do we ensure that the supply side, to which most of us are now committed, can also take effect through our schools?

The third big area is a problem in our country that she thought she had solved but that now appears in a different guise. We have mentioned, even quite properly on the Opposition Benches, that one of her great struggles was to bring the trade unions within the law decided by this House—not the law that they thought they would abide by. I have been perplexed by some of the recent newspaper coverage of her stewardship, much of which has stated that the country was previously ungovernable. It was governable all right, but not from here and not by the Government elected by the people.

What would Mrs Thatcher say about a global economy, part of which she was so responsible for creating, in which great world companies can choose whether or not they pay taxes and whether giving a donation to the Treasury might be an adequate performance of their duties instead? I would be very surprised if she did not see that as a challenge to our authority, and one with which we need to grapple. All three areas are part of the current agenda for our politics, and that is part of her legacy. I wonder whether she, if still in power, would not be tackling that in a more resolute way than we are currently.

I would like to end with two comments about Mrs Thatcher. We have talked about the power and force of her personality, but she was also brilliant on detail, and that was part of her power in Whitehall. I once had to see her to discuss a defence order for Cammell Laird. Indeed, my relationship with her began after the shop stewards meeting I had as MP for Birkenhead, when the shop stewards said, "Cut out all this old stuff. We want a cross-party group and we want you to lead it. We want all the parties in the Wirral lobbying for orders." That was the beginning of my friendship with her.

Our discussion took place the day she returned from a meeting with President Bush to decide on the first Gulf war. She had every reason to cancel it, but the meeting took place in her study. I had never seen her in such a state. She was marching around the study saying, "You've no idea what a struggle it is putting backbone into him." I said, "Prime Minister, come and sit next to me because I have some things I would like to discuss with you." She kept talking about putting backbone into the American President in order to fight this great war. Finally, she took pity on me and asked, "What do you want?" I made the plea for the defence order and she said, "Fine. Anything else?" When I said no, she immediately got up and continued, "You've no idea the victory I've had today over this." I was really rather excited to be this very small footnote in history.

Column 1654

Of course, courtesy dictated that whichever of the Wirral MPs had lobbied her would tell the others, but in my excitement I forgot to do so. About 36 hours later I saw David Hunt walking down the corridor and I remembered, so I began apologising. He said, "There's no need to apologise, Frank. The relevant Secretaries of State have received a prime ministerial minute and it has been copied to their permanent secretaries." There was a Prime Minister who was making history, for right or wrong—for right, I think—and who was extraordinarily wound up by the events that she had managed to bring about, and she had no staff with her, but before she went to bed that night she wrote that minute to implement what she had agreed. She was wonderful to lobby, because I knew within seconds whether she would do something or whether she thought it was a barmy idea, in which case there was no point discussing it further.

Let me make one last point. Towards the end of her time as Prime Minister, Mrs Thatcher was captured by a court on the Government Benches whose members made it difficult not only for many Government Back Benchers but particularly for someone such as me to see her. I wrote to the court and said that if they continued to block my chance of talking to her and lobbying her, I would kidnap her and tell her what they were doing—and would also lobby her. I got a note back late in the debate saying that the Prime Minister would see me at 10 o'clock. This is a good lesson for the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. She had a hugely impressive voting record. In my experience, she was one of the last out of the Lobby, and she was there for people to talk to—rather than going in, out and away to do what was thought to be more important business.

As she passed by, I said to her, "Prime Minister, should I follow you?" She said, "People do." As there was no mirror in front of her, I have never worked out whether she was smiling. I hope she was. Following her is a challenge to us. Do we see her record as though it had been brought down from Mount Sinai on tablets of stone, or would she have recognised, as I have hinted in the few conversations I have had on this specific point, that there is now a new agenda and that whatever principles one has must be applied to it?

The Leader of the Opposition and the Prime Minister were right: to her, what mattered were ideas and whether one could defend one's corner. I mourn her passing.

5.26pm

Mrs Eleanor Laing
(Epping Forest) (Con)

Margaret Thatcher changed the world for women—for women across the world, for women in Britain and for women in politics and in Parliament. I cannot stand by and watch commentators say that Margaret Thatcher did nothing for women when I know, as many of my hon. Friends in the House and those around the country know, just how much of a difference her very being has made to women.

Column 1655

In the first place, Margaret Thatcher's great belief in freedom and the individual and the fact that her Governments brought freedom and choice to people who had never had it before made a huge difference to millions of women throughout Britain during her years as Prime Minister. We have heard different examples today of what happened to people's individual lives in the 1980s, but overall there is no doubt whatsoever that bringing freedom, choice and opportunity—those were her watchwords—to young women of the 1980s transformed them into the women of the '90s and of this century who are willing to take on the world.

As for women in politics and Parliament, Margaret Thatcher gave us encouragement and advice. I am fed up with hearing the media channels say that she did not want women around and that there was only one woman in her Cabinet while she was Prime Minister. That was not her fault: there were not enough women on these Benches with the experience and seniority to go into her Cabinet. She encouraged women, so that by the end of her premiership and when John Major became Prime Minister, there were plenty of women to go into the Cabinet. They would not have been there had they not had the encouragement and backing of Margaret Thatcher when she was Prime Minister.

Those of us on the Conservative Benches also know what she has done in later years. Just over a year ago, when she had supposedly withdrawn from public life but while, as many of us know, she was still extremely active in supporting what we were doing, she came to not one but two or three events that I can think of. Those events involved not just raising money to help women enter Parliament, but her very presence in a room of aspiring people. After a mere handshake from Margaret Thatcher, a young woman would leave an event saying, "I can do this", whereas previously she had thought that she could not. Such was the power and personality of this great lady.

I can forgive female colleagues on the Opposition Benches for thinking that Margaret Thatcher did not encourage women because, of course, it goes without saying that she preferred to see Conservatives elected rather than Labour, or Liberal, female Members of Parliament. In her encouragement and advice, however, on a personal level she was much more like a mother than a Prime Minister. She would hold one's hand and say, "Well my dear, what are you going to do about that? What is going to happen about that?" She gave people true encouragement and confidence. Actually, I am wrong to stand here and say that she did that for women—she did it for everyone who had the slightest bit of Conservative blood in their body. She would make the very best of that and help them to realise just how much they could achieve. I do not mean just in politics; she did that for people throughout the country.

People thought that they did not have aspiration and opportunity because before Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister they did not have opportunities and were told that they should not, and could not, aspire. She gave everybody the confidence to make the very best of themselves—she certainly did that for my generation of women in the Conservative party, and she gave me personal advice that I have always valued and tried to live up to, not necessarily with the greatest results for which she might have hoped. She understood the difficulty that women experience in public life because they are trying to balance their duties to their families, their constituency and Parliament and their general duties. She understood that and made allowances for it. Again, the way she dealt with such matters was to give encouragement. It never occurred to her, of course, that women might need special pleading. Of course she did not want women-only shortlists; it simply never occurred to her that her female status was any hindrance at all, and indeed, that is because it was not.

Column 1656

The other great thing about Margaret Thatcher that no one has mentioned is that in everything she did in public life, and the many hours spent at the Dispatch Box, in Downing street and representing our country around the world, she was always, on every occasion, immaculate and elegant. Here was a lady who was tougher than any man, but she never lost her femininity.

Several hon. Members

rose—

Mr Speaker

Order. I do not know why Members think the hon. Lady has finished. She has finished that paragraph.

Mrs Laing

I was pausing for effect, Mr Speaker, but I will conclude. As a result of Margaret Thatcher's brilliance, resolve, determination, courage and example, no woman can ever be told that she cannot rise to any challenge. Margaret Thatcher made the world a better place.

5.34pm

Mr Kevin Barron
(Rother Valley) (Lab)

I offer my condolences to Lady Thatcher's family, and in particular to her children and grandchildren. Both Front-Bench speakers have said that she was not only the only woman Prime Minister of this country, but someone who rose to the top of a major political party when it was dominated by men, as it is still. The Prime Minister has said she broke through a big glass ceiling, and we should recognise that fact.

I add my thoughts to those of the hon. Member for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell). Today is the 15th anniversary of the Good Friday agreement. The House should acknowledge that Lady Thatcher's initiative in the 1980s was the start of the peace process, for which many people have good reason to thank her today.

Lady Thatcher was a radical politician and will remain a controversial figure. She would have expected that her conviction politics would court controversy even at such a time. Many of her domestic policies caused great concern and harm to many people and communities. I entered the House in 1983, nine months before the start of the miners' strike. I came from a mining background and represent a mining constituency. My overriding memory of the 12-month strike was not the violence that we saw on our television screens—I condemned the violence at the time—but the poverty and hardship that miners and their families went through for the best part of 12 months.

We know that the cause of the strike was the proposed pit closure programme and the consequent effect, particularly on male unemployment, which had been traditionally high in coal mining communities. I am not saying that the Government of the day were wholly to blame for the strike and its consequences, but I believe they had a responsibility to bring the dispute to an early end, which they did not meet.

Column 1657

On Saturday, I attended a march commemorating the closure of Maltby colliery—the coal mine I worked at as a young man. It was the sixth and last coal mine to close in the Rother Valley constituency. The bitterness that stems from the '84-'85 strike is there among people even all these years later. Although tribute can and will be paid to Margaret Thatcher, other voices in the country ought to be heard.

5.37pm

Mr Christopher Chope
(Christchurch) (Con)

It was on Monday, when I was in eastern Europe monitoring elections, that I heard the sad news of Margaret's death. In a sense, it was appropriate that I was out in eastern Europe witnessing democracy in action. In my view, that would not have been possible but for the work Margaret Thatcher did in destroying communism and opening up eastern Europe to proper democracy.

We have heard brilliant tributes today, led by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, who encapsulated, as did the Leader of the Opposition, so many of the values we hold dear when we remember Margaret Thatcher. I was struck by the right hon. Gentleman for reminding the House of the difference between consensus and conviction. That is the problem that many Government Members have—the coalition muddles consensus and conviction, which those of us who are conviction politicians find incredibly frustrating.

The theme I should like briefly to pursue is compassion, on which my hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) spoke so eloquently. Margaret Thatcher was a passionate Conservative, but she was also a compassionate Conservative. When I first met her in 1976—I was then chairman of Putney Conservatives—she visited an old people's day centre in Putney, where I saw her in action. She spoke to every single person in the day centre sitting room. She, as leader of the Conservative party, knelt down in order to be able to converse meaningfully with those who could not speak to her easily. That, for me, was a demonstration of her humility and compassion.

People have spoken about the way in which Margaret Thatcher would write letters to colleagues who had been bereaved and so on. A few years ago, my wife was in hospital. The flowers from Margaret Thatcher arrived before my own, which was rather embarrassing. That was the extent to which she was on the ball with her generosity and kindness not only to colleagues, but to their wives.

I agreed with Margaret Thatcher on almost everything. The only big issue on which I disagreed with her fundamentally was her decision not to stand in the second ballot in 1990. If she had stood, I think that she would have won and that the course of history would have been different. I am sad that those of us who went into her study that evening to persuade her to change her mind were unsuccessful. It was typical of her that she sent special notes to all of us who had tried to persuade her to stay on. It was a humiliating experience for that fantastic Prime Minister. Having been in that study and seen her condition, I would not wish it on anybody. Somebody who had served her country with such distinction and who had been a global leader in bringing freedom to much of eastern Europe was humiliated by people whom she thought were her friends and colleagues. I thought and still think that that was intolerable. May that sort of thing never happen again.

Column 1658

In 1997, Margaret came and supported my election campaign in Christchurch, where we were trying to overturn the majority of about 16,000 that the Liberal Democrats had won in the 1993 by-election. That was her first outing in the campaign. She was confronted by the press because one of our colleagues who was standing in Tatton had suddenly hit the headlines. Margaret demonstrated her ability to deal with the press with a phrase or, as in this case, a very short sentence that could not result in any follow-up. When asked about Neil Hamilton, she said, "Nobody is perfect." In those three words, she closed down the conversation, because she was not passing judgment on his case, but saying something that applies to all of us. That is an example of how she was able to deal with the press and choose words that were effective.

Later on the same visit, we went on a private visit to the Priory primary school in Christchurch, where Margaret demonstrated other attributes: the ability to listen and the ability to speak her mind. She said to a nine-year-old, "What do you want to do when you grow up?" He said, "I want to be a musician." She paused and stared with her wonderful eyes at this young man and said, "And what else do you want to be?" That demonstrated that she did nothing for effect. When she asked somebody a question, she was willing to listen to the answer and make a comment. She gave that person the benefit of her views, whether they liked it or not. I hope that that individual is now a successful musician. If he is not, I hope that he has a back-up, which is what she was saying he ought to have.

It is a fantastic privilege to have this opportunity to pay tribute to, in my view, the greatest Prime Minister of all time. Sometimes one sits in the Chamber and it takes a long time to be called, but it has been a privilege to gather together today and listen to every contribution. If the debate goes on until 10 o'clock, as I hope it will, that will be some compensation for the loss of this great lady.

5.44pm

Ms Gisela Stuart
(Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab)

When Nancy Astor left the House of Commons, she said "I will miss the House, but the House will not miss me." I think that this House, and the other House, will probably miss Baroness Thatcher for longer than many another woman who has served in this place.

Let me say something about Margaret Thatcher and the representation of women. I do so as a Member of Parliament whose constituency has been represented by women for longer than any other constituency in the country—since 1953. The first of those women was Dame Edith Pitt. The then Conservative and Unionist party had to nominate her as the candidate because the local association had rebelled against the original nomination on the basis that it had a perfectly good candidate, albeit a woman, and the party caved in. When Dame Jill Knight was nominated in 1966, the Conservative association said "We have already tried a woman, so we will have a man now", and she said "I will accept that argument, but only if it works both ways." Of course, it did not.

Column 1659

As the Prime Minister said, Margaret Thatcher broke through that glass ceiling. She kicked doors open. Indeed, she kicked doors open for Labour women, in a way that they perhaps did not entirely appreciate, because the trade unions had an enormously powerful role in candidate selections. It benefited us when the unions were forced to provide more openings for women, and when "one member one vote" and many similar changes came along, although Margaret Thatcher would not have thought of those developments in that way.

I do not think Margaret Thatcher realised that the problem was more systemic. Notwithstanding what was said by the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Mrs Laing), before the 1997 election there were more men called John than there were women MPs in the House of Commons. In May 1997, 121 women were elected, which meant that there were more women MPs in one intake than there had been in the entire history of Parliament. I do not think we are right to lay the blame for that at the door of Margaret Thatcher, because it was a reflection of the times. I think that if she had not been the way she was, she would not have been in the position that she was in.

I have asked myself why she is still so controversial. A few years ago, *The House Magazine* gave Denis Healey a lifetime achievement award, and it was Geoffrey Howe who presented him with it. Two old adversaries met in friendship at Speaker's House. Denis Healey said "When you get to my age, there are no enemies any more; there are just people who are still alive with you." Somehow, I do not think that Margaret Thatcher would have seen it in that way. She was fighting to the very end, and I think it was a sign of the times that she had to fight to the very end.

Whole generations have forgotten what 1979 was like. I came here from Germany in the 1970s. I know that Margaret Thatcher would not want us not to learn any lessons from the battles that she had fought—some lost, some won, and some which continue. I am thinking in particular of the role of the market. It is interesting that Margaret Thatcher considered that Hayek's book "The Road to Serfdom" should be compulsory reading. Many Government Members, and probably even more of my hon. Friends, will be surprised to learn that I agree that it should be compulsory reading, as a reminder of the role of the market. [Hon. Members: "Come over to this side!"] No, it is not a question of "Come over to this side".

Similar arguments have been advanced about the force of the market. It has been argued that it actually liberates. The market does not need to be made social, because it is already social. It challenges vested interests, and lets outsiders in. In Germany, that was a social democratic argument advanced by Ludwig Erhard, the father of the social market economy. One legacy of the entrenchment of Thatcherism in the '80s that might have to be looked at now and in years to come is the polarisation of the argument with false options. We are boxing ourselves into corners, which will not be terribly beneficial to either side of the House. If we believe that markets are social and important—in everything Margaret Thatcher did, she realised that they could challenge the status quo, vested interests and outsiders, and bring them in—perhaps we should recognise that they are also socialist.

Column 1660

After all she said, why then can I vividly remember the moment Margaret Thatcher left No. 10—Government Members have talked of tears—as being to me an enormous joy? I have been reflecting on why I felt so strongly. It took me back to the Kent miners' strike in March 1985. I was in Essex, my children were small and I was listening to the radio about the end of that bitter, final strike. I was in tears, but could not work out why. I think it was because the people at the bottom were taking an enormous hit and suffering for the mistakes of people in power, whether people in government or the trade union representatives. The same thing is now happening again in parts of Europe. It would have been interesting to hear what Margaret Thatcher made of what is happening in the eurozone, where the people paying the price are not the politicians who took wrong choices or the people in power who made mistakes, but the generations of unemployed people.

That is what people associated with the Thatcher Government and what makes her Government that much more contentious. She is one of those few figures whose obituaries are not sufficiently balanced to reflect her achievements as well as her weaknesses, which she had—as she herself said, nobody is perfect. The reason for the insufficient balance is that polarisation. She was one of those public figures of whom it will take much longer for both sides to make a true assessment, but make no mistake—I think now of all the figures of Prime Ministers in the Lobby—she was one of the defining figures of the last century. The House should be proud that the first woman Prime Minister of this country will be honoured in the way I think she deserves to be honoured—as someone who served her country for longer than any other Prime Minister—and I think that the House is rightly doing that today.

5.52pm

Sir Paul Beresford
(Mole Valley) (Con)

I shall be succinct, as I am surrounded by people anxious to speak. I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart). Her last paragraph or so was exactly right and expresses how I have felt for some considerable time. Since I became a councillor in 1979, Margaret Thatcher has been someone we have looked to—not always looked up to, but certainly looked to.

My hon. Friends the Members for Christchurch (Mr Chope) and for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) touched on Margaret Thatcher's compassion and understanding for the people at the bottom, the lowly people—an aspect of her character that does not often come out, but which they certainly brought out. I found out about that myself, when I was a lowly London councillor having trouble with English, my second language. I had come from New Zealand, where politicians were at the bottom of the pile and where, if someone wanted to contact the Prime Minister, they looked his phone number up in the Wellington phonebook—according to mythology, it is still there.

Here, to my amazement, a polite request to see the Prime Minister, explained, was generally accepted. In my day as a councillor, many of the meetings I had with the Prime Minister at my request—some were at hers—went through my hon. Friend the Member for Maldon, who, as he has explained, was her political adviser. When it was the other way around, I could picture his face grinning on the phone as he said, "The Prime Minister would like to see you"—pause—"today"—pause—"Well, at least as soon as you possibly can."

Column 1661

I am sure that my hon. Friend will remember that the way to stimulate a conversation with Margaret Thatcher was to disagree. If somebody disagreed, her eyes lit up and she launched into the argument. If somebody had a proposition, or she had a proposition, she turned the discussion into a friendly argument. My hon. Friend used to sit to one side, but between us, like an umpire at Wimbledon, with his head moving from side to side, with a faint grin, and I would peer out of the corner of my eye to see if I was winning. In any discussion with Margaret Thatcher at that time, I had to be very well prepared, and I was never quite sure when starting an argument disagreeing with her whether she was actually disagreeing with me or testing my hypothesis.

Margaret Thatcher's saying, "The lady's not for turning", has come up several times today. That might have been true at that particular time, but I found in practice that she would listen and listen to an argument, particularly if there was a political aspect to it, and be prepared to change her position, if the argument was suitable and good enough. She must have done so, because she could not have won so many elections in a row had she had mural dyslexia and been inflexible or unable to see the point of an argument. I think that is why she used to spend time talking to all kinds of people, from Presidents through to business people and the little people, such as me. I remember Lord King telling my business partner and me that he was to see Margaret Thatcher and that he was going to tell her this, that and the other thing. We met him two days after the meeting and asked him how it went. "Oh", he said, "Mrs Thatcher told me this, she told me that and she told me the other thing." I felt good.

As many Members have said, Margaret Thatcher was also prepared to help with campaigning, if we felt it would be of benefit, which I found extraordinary and it provided a real insight into her ability to understand. In 1986, we had a small battle in Wandsworth. We went into an election with a majority of one out of a full council of 61. Her standing in the polls, if I remember correctly, was 19% or 20%. Being a great supporter of some of the things we were trying to do and had done, she offered to drop in on the campaign in support. This was politely declined, and equally politely our "Thank you, but no" was accepted. Do remember, however, that shortly afterwards, that 19% or 20% lifted to a win at the election that shortly followed. It also, regrettably, in a way, meant that we won and we went from a majority of one to a majority of 35. As ever, however, Margaret Thatcher, the Prime Minister, had the last say. I received another one of those phone calls from my hon. Friend the Member for Maldon—a summons to Downing street. I then had a session at which she picked my brains over what Wandsworth was doing, the election result and so on, followed by a request for an urgent formal report. My hon. Friend is a past master at quiet whispering in someone's ear so that they do not miss the point, and as I left with him, he said, "Today is Tuesday. Can we have it by Friday?" I said, "Look, I'm awfully sorry John, but I'm going home to pick up my bags, and then I'm flying out for two weeks." Exactly two weeks later I came back, opened the doors and dropped my cases, and as I dropped my cases, the phone rang. "Well", he said, "Have you written it yet? It's been two weeks. We want it. The Prime Minister particularly wants it."

Column 1662

What I particularly enjoyed in discussions with Margaret Thatcher was that at the end of a discussion she generally had made up her mind, and I was told where I stood. That was extremely useful. On one visit, I sought an audience to explain that the then Inner London Education Authority was serving an education disservice on the children of London, including those in my own borough. My proposition was that the authority could and would provide a better education for inner-London children. I had no inkling of her thinking, but she immediately made it clear that I was pushing at an open door. Legislation followed, and even those who had once supported the ILEA recognised that it was a good move.

I came to this country and worked in east London. This country, as someone has already said, was the sick man of Europe. We were in a desperate state. Our balance of payments was appalling, we had gone to the IMF with hat in hand, and there were all the other things that many of us have mentioned. Margaret Thatcher's arrival as Prime Minister could not have been any later, because we were on the edge; I just wish it had been sooner.

Several hon. Members

rose—

Mr Speaker

Order. There is no formal time limit on Back-Bench contributions today, but I gently point out to the House that no fewer than 48 right hon. and hon. Members are still seeking to catch my eye. I know that Members will wish to tailor their contributions accordingly.

6.00pm

Mr Barry Sheerman
(Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op)

You were not in short trousers, Mr Speaker, but I think—because I checked your birth date—just starting your A-levels in 1979, when I got elected to the House of Commons on the same day as Mrs Thatcher became Prime Minister. You can imagine my astonishment when I came No. 1 in the list for the first Prime Minister's questions, which meant I was going to ask her first question. Unfortunately, my predecessor, Curly Mallalieu, died that week, and I had to withdraw from that first Prime Minister's questions. It took me a long time to get another question to the Prime Minister. Indeed, the next time I got a highly placed question, Willie Whitelaw was standing in for her. Eventually, on 15 April 1980, I said:

"Will the Prime Minister take time today to reflect on the mounting evidence emerging this week—not only from her Chancellor of the Exchequer—that her economic strategy is destroying Britain's industrial base? Will she further consider a reversal of those policies which have led to a soaring inflation rate of 20 per cent., rising unemployment and crippling interest rates that will soon turn this country into a banana republic, both economically and diplomatically?"—[Official Report, 15 April 1980; Vol. 982, c. 1007.]

I mention that only because for a number of years I was a Back Bencher, and for a long time a shadow Minister, drilled to hate everything Mrs Thatcher stood for. Over those years, I came to respect Margaret Thatcher because she commanded the Dispatch Box and was a fantastic parliamentarian. However, we cannot pretend that people did not love and loathe her. In fact, the election results show that more people loved her than loathed her.

When I was at the London School of Economics, I studied with Michael Oakeshott and read Hayek, and I was very much influenced by both those gentlemen. Oakeshott took me through a wonderful study of Machiavelli's "The Prince" and "Discourses", which tell us that for a leader—a prince or Prime Minister—to survive, they have to be lucky. Mrs Thatcher was not only talented as a leader, but lucky. I was on the Opposition Benches knowing what a shambles the Opposition were. We spent more time fighting each other within the Labour party than we had time to fight the Government. It is not good for democracy to have such a weak Opposition as we had post 1979. Sometimes we stand up and say that Mrs Thatcher rolled over the mining communities, and she did. She caused great hardship. Terrible things happened to people in the mining communities, and the miners' dispute should have ended much sooner than it did. My heart went out to the wives of miners selling things to raise money and trying to keep families together. I remember it very well. Although my constituency is not a mining constituency, it is very close to mining constituencies. I understand the people who loathed Mrs Thatcher, but I also understand that at that time those people were let down by the Opposition because we could not get our act together to defeat her.

Column 1663

There have been some very good and perceptive speeches. I agree with one or two Government Members and did not agree with two or three of my colleagues. I have reflected on what Mrs Thatcher contributed, and I think it was this. What happened in 1979 was a colossal sea change in British politics, and we needed it. We needed something radical to happen to the untidy post-war shambles of a consensus, and Mrs Thatcher was it. It was not about Conservatism or Toryism. The people who said that it was Gladstonian, laissez-faire liberalism were absolutely right, as we know, because that blue liberalism was well known and

understood in West Yorkshire. That is what she stood for, and it surprised everyone. Labour Members did not know how to handle it, and partly because of that she had three general election victories. We were trounced. We were a divided party and a divided Opposition, and we had a very long and tough time getting through it. Mrs Thatcher transformed the Labour party. We had to reform and change and get our act together, or we would have ceased to have the presence and power of a major party in our country. We must remember what Mrs Thatcher did for parliamentary democracy.

We are again overdue for a radical change in how we regard our parliamentary democracy. We need a voice in this Chamber—I do not know which party it will come from—that says that there are some deep inequities in our society. There are serious problems, different from those that Mrs Thatcher faced in 1979 and in the years of her prime ministership, but very deep. My right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr Field) touched on some of them. There is the tragic decline of our great cities, many of them in the north and the midlands. That has happened all over the developed world—in the United States, we should look at what is happening in Detroit and Pittsburgh. There is something deeply wrong with how our societies are developing, and that is to do with a complex change in international capitalism, as Labour Members would call it, and the international structure of economics.

Something fundamental is happening that we have become a bit complacent about in all parts of this House. We will need somebody with the originality of Thatcher to get us to wake up to what is going on. If we are honest—I make this a constant theme in my speeches; I am sorry—most of us will admit that tiny numbers of people in our constituencies are actively involved in politics. We are in a democracy where only 65% voted at the last election and 6 million people did not even register to vote. The state of our parliamentary democracy is deplorable. We will need someone with a vision, perhaps based on a very different political view, who will say, "If we value this democracy we have got to shake it up."

Column 1664

I have spoken today because I got to admire and quite like Mrs Thatcher, who, as some of my colleagues have said, could be very pleasant indeed. She would give someone a real roasting from the Dispatch Box if they made a comment, but out there in the corridor she would be very kind. That is the truth of the woman. She was phenomenal. She did things that I deplored; she did things I thought were wonderful. There is a balance, and over time we will judge how good it was. We are facing a challenge to our democracy, and we need a Thatcher-like—not the same as Thatcher—radical change that will again wake us up to the fact that our country faces challenges to which, at present, we have no answers.

6.09pm

Mike Freer
(Finchley and Golders Green) (Con)

Share

If I may, I shall speak briefly about my predecessor, the Member of Parliament for Finchley and Friern Barnet. Many people have talked about her role on the global or national stage. I wish to talk about the woman who represented Finchley for 33 years, the woman whom my party members remember never, ever as Maggie, but simply as Mrs T or, more fondly, "our Margaret".

From the outset Finchley Conservatives knew they had a winner. One of my stalwarts, Derek Phillips, recounts how as a young Conservative he went into that selection meeting saying, "I'm not voting for a woman." He came out having voted for that woman. He changed his mind in short order when she was clearly head and shoulders above the men, and from that day on, she remained head and shoulders above the men around her.

Much is said about Mrs Thatcher's background. She is described, often disparagingly, as the grocer's daughter and the housewife who knew the value of thrift and of living within one's means, as if there was something wrong with that. For me, Mrs Thatcher illustrates clearly and sharply what shapes our views as Members of Parliament, whether it is ideology, background or our casework. It is probably a blend of all three.

Finchley and Friern Barnet was and is a suburban constituency. Mrs Thatcher would have seen at first hand how Government policies affected the lives of local families —families who had worked hard to buy their home or families who struggled to make ends meet, including the many pensioners in the constituency. When commentators describe her as driven by ideology, they fail to understand the woman. They fail to understand that the constituency was her touchstone.

As might be expected, Finchley has a wealth of memorabilia. I came across an election address dating back to 1974. I also searched for a photograph of one young Finchley student called John Bercow who, I am told, approached Mrs Thatcher at one of the hustings and was firmly told to go and join the Young Conservatives. You will be pleased to know, Mr Speaker, that no photographic evidence exists. I have searched.

Column 1665

If I may be forgiven for using a prop, I found an election address dating back to 1974. I shall highlight a few excerpts from it. Mrs Thatcher said in her local election address of 1974, 40 years ago:

"As a nation we must stop living on borrowed money. We must gradually reduce the debt over a period of three or four years."

That sounds familiar. She went on to say:

“We must keep public spending within the capacity and willingness of our citizens to foot the bills.”

The address goes on to talk about helping first-time buyers with their deposits, of helping council tenants to buy their homes and of easing the rates burden. That was 40 years ago and some would say nothing has changed.

The day-to-day issues that faced Mrs Thatcher as a local constituency MP influenced her policies. Finchley was where she came to recharge her batteries. She knew that when she came to Finchley, she would leave the advisers behind and she would hear the unvarnished truth, as seen by her constituents and, equally importantly, by her supporters and her activists. One of her agents tells the story that within minutes of Mrs Thatcher returning to Downing street, the No.10 machine would be on the phone, demanding politely to know what she had been told in Finchley, because she had returned to Downing street full of vigour, demanding to know what was going on with this or that. Finchley brought home to her what needed to be done.

There is one incident that perhaps explains her drive to abolish the rates and introduce the community charge. This is an example of how I believe her constituency work shaped her policies. The rights and wrongs of the community charge are not for today, but the casework that Mrs Thatcher came across drove home the inequality of a household with several wage earners paying the same as a pensioner. She saw at first hand the struggle that many on low and fixed incomes had with the rates. One experience I will relate. I am told that one elderly resident came to see her in a state of distress. The resident had paid her rates in cash in an envelope to the town hall. The cash went astray. Mrs Thatcher knew the hardship that having to find the rates once had caused, let alone having to find them a second time to make up the cash that had gone astray. It is not commonly known that Mrs Thatcher quietly sent a cheque and paid the rates for that resident. She was far from the heartless caricature portrayed in the media and by her opponents.

Mrs Thatcher took enormous interest in her constituents, and her ability to remember their names and their concerns, often months after first meeting them, was truly astounding. In the early 1990s when I was a local councillor in Finchley, Mrs Thatcher came to a summer fete, which was held every year on a small council estate. She arrived bang on time, for she was a stickler for punctuality. She swept in, in the Jaguar. Out she came, as immaculate as ever. She ignored the local dignitaries such as humble councillors, went straight across to the organiser of the fete, whom I will call Mrs Smith, and said, “Now, dear, how did your daughter get on with her GCSEs? She sat them last year, didn’t she? Wasn’t she sitting seven?” I was completely bowled over by this. I spoke to her agent and asked if he made copious notes while no one was looking so that he could brief her before she arrived. I was firmly told, “No, she simply remembers.” That was the measure of the woman as a constituency MP.

Column 1666

Mrs Thatcher had an amazing knack of being able to put anyone at ease, usually because she knew that what was important to them had to be important to her. The dripping tap that the council would not repair was the most important thing to that constituent, and so it became the most important thing to Mrs T. There are countless examples of her warmth and her compassion. The devotion of those who worked with her and stayed with her after she was no longer the Prime Minister is testament to that. Many of her close protection officers chose to stay with her, rather than move up the ranks. One of them recently told me of a Christmas time at Chequers. He came back to the police mess room to find that Mrs Thatcher had been in. She had tidied up and decorated it with Christmas decorations. She had cleaned out the hearth, laid a fire and left a flask of coffee on the table for her police officers. That is the woman few people saw.

It was said by my noble Friend Baron Baker of Dorking that we shall not see the like of Mrs Thatcher again. Well, we probably will see a woman party leader. We probably will see a woman Prime Minister again. But will we see the intellect, the drive, the passion and the core beliefs to shape events, not bend to them? Will we see the whole package? I do not think so. “Our Margaret”, as my members remember her, was an outstanding constituency MP. Finchley is proud to have selected her, and we are grateful to the Thatcher family for lending her to us.

6.18pm

Paul Flynn >
(Newport West) (Lab)

Share

Unwisely, I once put down a written question to Prime Minister Thatcher, asking her to list the failures of her premiership. The answer was disappointingly brief. Another MP tabled a question asking her to list the successes of her premiership. The answer cost £4,500 and filled 23 columns of *Hansard*. Modesty was never her prime virtue, but she had many virtues and I would rank her as one of the two best politicians of the last century. The other one was Clement Attlee. It is significant that, about an hour ago, Matthew Parris tweeted:

“Just come across a small, downpage Guardian piece from Oct 1967: ‘quiet funeral for Lord Attlee’.”

Prime Ministers are not made by the trappings of power, or by expensive funerals.

I should like to share a little story with hon. Members. It involves a cunning plot by the late Tony Banks, who had some power over the decisions about statues in the House as he chaired the Advisory Committee on Works of Art. He commissioned a statue of Mrs Thatcher that was of exactly the right dimensions to fit into one of the empty niches outside the Chamber in the Members’ Lobby. It was made of white marble.

Unfortunately, however, it was decapitated. His cunning plan was to put that white marble statue there in the hope of having a bronze statue of another Prime Minister, who is possibly not held in the same respect today.

Margaret Thatcher was not like most politicians. We all pretend that we act on the basis of evidence, sense and reason, but most of us—apart from her and Clement Attlee—act on the basis of pressure, prejudice and perception. Those are the things that move us and determine what laws are passed in the House. She was a woman who knew about evidence, however. She knew about scientific evidence, and that is the reason that she was one of the first to embrace the green agenda.

Column 1667

I also believe, however, that Mrs Thatcher was very wrong in many of the things that she did, and my main reason for speaking today is to tell the House what happened to my constituents at that time. No one would question the need for greater financial discipline in the 1970s and into the 1980s; industries were in a mess. However, the great tragedy for Mrs Thatcher was one that befalls many leaders who stay long in office: she became surrounded by sycophants who praised her extravagantly—*[Laughter.]* We have heard a great deal of that today, and much of what has been said is entirely true, but there has also been a huge amount of hyperbole. When she was in charge, what followed was hubris, and hubris was followed by nemesis.

The way in which Mrs Thatcher treated heavy industry in this country involved pursuing a mission to discipline the industries and to make them profitable, but she did not know when to stop. I am thinking particularly of the industry that was the backbone of my city of Newport, the steel industry, which is now a pale shadow of its former self. I am afraid that she did not fight for heavy industry in the same way that she fought for the farming industry or for the financial industry, and that had terrible results. Many of the people in my constituency who had devoted their lives to the steel industry had special skills. They defined themselves as steelworkers, but suddenly their skills were redundant. Those people were no longer important; they were robbed of that scrap of dignity around which we all need to build our lives. She went too far, and we all know the result.

There is great respect for Margaret Thatcher as a political personality, and history will judge her as a great Prime Minister. Many of her attributes that have been described today will be seen by most people here as great virtues. Her role was to alter the appearance and persona of England—rather than Wales or Scotland—in the world, but there has been a cost to that. The cost of punching above our weight militarily is that we spend beyond our interests and we die beyond our responsibilities.

There are two deaths that we should be talking about today. Of course we should be talking about Mrs Thatcher, but we should also mention Lance Corporal Jamie Webb of 1st Battalion the Mercian Regiment. He was 24, and he died on 25 March. He was repatriated to this country last Thursday. I do not know whether anyone saw any publicity about that, or whether any attention was paid to the event. He was the 441st of our soldiers to die in the Afghan war. I have visited Brize Norton and seen the sensitively conceived arrangements there. I cannot think of any way in which they could bring greater comfort to the bereaved families of those who have fallen in the name of this country, but I am afraid that the way in which the processions now take place has been designed to avoid drawing attention to these tragedies. Today, along with that of Margaret Thatcher, we should remember the names of the 441 who died for their country, one of whom was Jamie Webb. We should remember their sacrifice and reflect on the fact that the spirit that leads us to punch above our weight often has tragic consequences.

Column 1668

6.26pm

Simon Hughes >
(Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (LD)

Share

It is a privilege to be here today to pay tribute to Margaret Thatcher, both personally and on behalf of party colleagues and the many of my constituents who will wish to pass on their condolences, through the Prime Minister, to her family and extended family and to her close friends and all those in the Conservative party who worked with her.

Two themes have emerged today. The first has been a wish to express our condolences and sympathy. The second has been an expression of admiration and respect from across the House, irrespective of party, for someone who was one of the dominant political figures not only in this country but in the democratic politics of the western world in the last century. She was one of the strongest and most determined leaders that our country has ever known.

Like my late mother, Mrs Thatcher was born in the great and productive county of Lincolnshire. Given that she also had the same birthday as my dad—13 October—it was not surprising that we followed her career with greater than usual interest once she entered the Heath Cabinet. As has already been mentioned, she set many examples to follow. She set an example to young people by first standing for Parliament at the age of 24, and to people who do not succeed the first time, in that it took three goes before she got here. She then became her party's leader before she was 50. I remember hearing the news of her election as leader, and of Ted Heath's defeat, when I was standing at the railway station in Bruges during my year as a postgraduate student at the College of Europe. It was clear that that was a significant moment in British political history. It also caused a bit of a dispute in our family. My dad was not keen, but my mum was more admiring.

Through her efforts, Margaret Thatcher changed the place of women in British public life and politics. Let us check the figures. Before she was elected, there had been no general election with more than 200 female candidates, or more than 30 elected women MPs. In the general election of 1992, when she stood down, there were 571 female candidates, and 60 women were elected to this place. The numbers have risen significantly since then. She would not have argued that there was a direct cause and effect, but I am sure that there was one, and thank God for that. It was also significant that, through her election, a scientist became a British party leader and Prime Minister. Her forensic skills and scientific interests were evident, and I am sure that her interest in and worries about climate change stemmed from that.

Margaret Thatcher winning the 1979 election was clearly another defining moment in our history. I hope that colleagues on the Opposition Benches will not try to airbrush the fact that, before that, this country had been through a dire few years economically. It had not been a happy time. We had had to go to the international community for financial rescue, the lights had been going out in the early part of the decade, and we had been working only three days a week. So it was not as though the 1970s were halcyon days. She then delivered three election victories, two of which had majorities of more than 100, always with 13 million or more votes, and always with more than 42% of the electorate supporting her. I noticed—I pay tribute to her successor in Finchley, the hon. Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer)—that in her last election she received her highest ever vote, which is a testimony to the way she was respected in her north London constituency.

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I first came to this House when she was Prime Minister, in a by-election in 1983. I always believed that all Prime Ministers and Governments do many good things, but do not do everything right—some clearly right, some clearly wrong. I came here as a member of the broader Christian church, as she did, and I realised I would have a difficulty from the beginning. Christians and people of other faiths are called to love everybody, but sometimes loving Mrs T was a bit difficult from the Opposition Benches.

She was clearly right in her attitude towards the Falklands—absolutely right to be determined to recapture the Falklands for Britain. She was clearly courageous beyond expectation in her determination not to be blown off course by the despicable IRA bomb in Brighton in 1984, and she was almost unbelievably successful in her work to bring down the iron curtain.

After she died this week, I worked out that I had engaged with her across the House on 19 occasions between 1983 and her final debate in November 1990. I was able to thank her for supporting work on the Rose theatre, which had been excavated—she did have an interest in culture and the arts. On a few occasions, I had to have a strong go at her with regard to London matters. There was a need to reform London government, but abolishing the Greater London council was absolutely not the way to go. There was a need to mobilise the docklands and urban areas for regeneration, but having no democratic participation was not the way to go. Then there were other issues that were good ideas in part, but often left some things worse off than before. Giving people the right to buy their own council homes was popular and in many ways a good idea, but not giving councils the power to decide whether they wanted to use that power was wrong. Not to make the discounts reflect accurately the length of time someone had been in a home was inappropriate. Not guaranteeing that all the moneys went back to councils was extremely unhelpful, and is one cause of the shortage of social and affordable housing today.

Mrs Thatcher was right to take on the trade unions, which had become over-mighty in the 1970s, but she was wrong to do so in a way that decimated much of manufacturing industry, not just in our coal mines but in other places, such as south Wales. She was right to work, as she did successfully, to bring down the inflation rate from 13% in 1979 to 5% or less in five of the next 10 years. However, presiding over unemployment going up from 4% to more than 9% was not a price worth paying and it had serious, adverse consequences. Although pensioners were better off in terms of the amount of money they had in their retirement, many never forgave her for breaking the link with earnings.

In her very last speech I put it to her that, sadly, she had left the gap between the rich and the poor much wider. I have to say that the gap continued under the Labour Government. She accused me of saying that we would rather the poor were poorer provided the rich were less rich. That was never our view. We needed a fairer society and sadly we did not get one.

I referred to Bruges at the beginning of my speech and I want to end with the Bruges speech she made 25 years ago. It bears re-reading, as I am sure the Prime Minister has on more than one occasion. I end with exact quotes from the speech she gave to the college at which I had been privileged to be a student:

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“Our destiny is in Europe, as part of the Community. That is not to say that our future lies only in Europe... The Community is not an end in itself...The European Community is a practical means by which Europe can ensure the future prosperity and security of its people in a world in which there are many other powerful nations and groups of nations...Certainly we want to see Europe more united and with a greater sense of common purpose...I want to see us work more closely...Europe is stronger when we do so, whether it be in trade, in defence or in our relations with the rest of the world...But it must be in a way which preserves the different traditions...for these have been the source of Europe’s vitality through the centuries.”

We are proud of her patriotism and give thanks for it. She will be respected throughout the whole of the rest of our political lives.

6.34pm

Mr David Lammy >
(Tottenham) (Lab)

Share

I am grateful for the opportunity to pay tribute to Baroness Thatcher and to associate myself with the remarks of the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. It is an incredibly long way from Broadwater Farm, via the Bar, to being here as a Member of Parliament. I think it is an even longer way to go from a grocer's shop in Grantham, through Oxbridge and the Bar, to leading one's country as a woman. For that single reason alone, it is appropriate that we come together to pay tribute to Margaret Thatcher.

I look at her legacy from the vantage point of being a young person growing up in Tottenham, with a single parent occasionally reliant on the state and on benefits, during a difficult time for our country. It would certainly be the case that for most of my youth Margaret Thatcher was not somebody I admired, and there were occasions when I actually felt quite scared by much of what she said and what her Government seemed to do. Some 25 or 30 years later, I feel slightly differently. My political generation, which includes the leaders of our political parties, coincides with a period in politics of 24-hour media, presentation, soundbite, spin and polling. All of us in this House have met politicians who seem to not really know their own mind. We have met politicians who say one thing one minute and then, when they have met someone else, seem to say the last thing they heard. Some of us have even met party leaders like that. In that context, I have tremendous respect for someone with conviction and courage, someone who is willing to stand their ground and who is clear on their values. At this time in our history, when things are so hard and there is so much deep concern about our political class, we could do with more conviction from all parts of this House.

I said that I was basing my remarks on growing up in Tottenham, but for the second part of my youth I spent seven years in Peterborough. There, I came across a different kind of working class attitude to Margaret Thatcher. These were people who had left London and gone to a new town. They were making their way and wanted to forge ahead. They were enjoying holidays and owning their homes for the first time. I would go around to their small houses and on their coffee tables they would have the "Tell Sid" brochure, so keen were they to take part in the experiment of buying shares in British Gas. I have to say that my mum got one of those brochures for her coffee table, but that was just to appear as though she was able to buy shares in British Gas.

Column 1671

There were two quiet revolutions of the 20th century that have given us the country and world we have today. The social liberal revolution of the 1960s is perhaps best personified by the quest for freedom and human rights that we associate with another great elder statesman, Nelson Mandela.

The second liberal revolution must most definitely be the economic liberal revolution of the 1980s. Margaret Thatcher was obviously at its epicentre, and for that reason she is a giant figure in our history, and it is right that our country comes together to pay her due respect. However—*[Interruption.]* I am afraid there is a big however, because we also live with the consequences of a hyper-individualised society—consequences that we see in materialism, consumerism, over-corporatism and a sense that unemployment is fine and that those on benefits can fend for themselves. I remind the House that for people in Handsworth, Brixton, Tottenham, St Pauls in Bristol, Moss Side in Manchester and Chapeltown in Leeds, it was a desperate time, with tremendous suffering, and we stand in solidarity with colleagues in the north, particularly in our mining towns and former steelworks, who bear the scars today of that period of social adjustment.

No one has mentioned the Commonwealth, which is an important institution. Despite the advice of Rajiv Gandhi, Oliver Tambo and others who urged economic sanctions, Margaret Thatcher said, "No, I will go it alone." That is a great scar on the history of the Commonwealth.

The history will be chequered for many years. It is right that we pay tribute, but it is also right that we reflect on young people growing up at that time, particularly in our tower blocks and estates, and the suffering they are still going through—not a feral underclass, but workless poor. It began in that period and today it still continues for successive generations.

Several hon. Members Share

rose—

Mr Speaker Share

Order. If everyone is to get in, speeches of no more than four minutes will be required. I appeal to hon. and right hon. Members to help me to help them.

6.42pm

Mr Charles Walker
(Broxbourne) (Con) Share

I shall try to be brief, Mr Speaker.

I did not know Lady Thatcher. I met her on a few occasions, but I admired her from afar. I rise to pay my respects and to pass on the respects of many tens of thousands of my constituents who would want me to be here today. She was a great woman, a great Prime Minister and she had love of this country emblazoned on her heart.

6.43pm

Mr David Anderson
(Blaydon) (Lab) Share

As a former coal miner who became a care worker in the 1980s, looking after frail elderly people—

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particularly frail elderly women suffering from dementia, incontinence and the inability to bathe and dress themselves—I have nothing but empathy for the family of Margaret Thatcher. They will feel an immense sense of loss that will almost certainly be tinged with a sense of relief. They will feel guilty about that relief, but they should not; it is a normal, healthy attitude when a loved one has been brought low by the reality of our mortality.

As a former miner and trade union leader and as the Member for a constituency whose history was built on the hard work of ordinary men and women, it would be remiss of me not to record the reality of life for people in such constituencies because of policies promoted by Margaret Thatcher. She came to power promising to bring harmony where there was discord. I can safely say that in mining communities up and down the country she brought the opposite. Most mining areas were stable, secure and safe communities where we worked hard and played hard. We did not complain about the difficult conditions in which we worked. All we asked for was the chance to carry on doing that work.

We had built communities over decades, in some cases over centuries, and they had stood the test of time. We built sports centres, swimming pools and cricket and football clubs. We built libraries and developed brass bands, and we ran art classes that gained international fame. That was part and parcel of our culture, but none of it seemed to matter to Margaret Thatcher. She believed that we were no longer any use to the nation because we were deemed “uneconomic”.

On what basis was that case made? I believe that the main reason why the United Kingdom coal industry was classed as uneconomic was that we insisted on running safe coal mines, unlike those in the rest of the world. Our history was longer than that of other coal industries. It was littered with numerous examples of avoidable deaths, and we as a country agreed to invest in the best quality equipment in the world and in training people to produce coal as safely as possible. One of the great disgraces in this country is that we import more than 50 million tonnes of coal a year from countries where men are killed in their thousands, yet we closed down an industry that was the safest and most technically advanced in the world. There is still blood on the coal that is burned in British power stations, but it is American blood, Russian blood, Chinese blood or Colombian blood, so that is okay. Well, it should not be okay. As a country, we have millions of tons of coal beneath our feet.

The other area where the so-called economic justification falls down was in the failure of Margaret Thatcher and her Governments to take into account the social cost in communities such as mine, where there was no alternative employment for people who were losing their jobs, and particularly for their children. The village where I lived had seen coal mining for almost two centuries. In a matter of months after closure, we were gripped by a wave of petty crime—burglary and car crime—mostly related to drugs. We have never recovered from it. When someone wakes in the middle of the night and goes downstairs because their home is being burgled, and finds out the next day that it was the son of one of their best friends, it puts into perspective a community that was built on reliance and taking care of each other. That takes a lot of recovering from.

Column 1673

The situation was compounded by the crass decision in 1988 to sell off houses owned by the National Coal Board to private landlords. They brought in people from outside the area who had no respect for the community or for the houses they were given. Twenty years later, houses that were sold to private landlords for £4,000 were bought back by the council for £60,000 of public money, only for them to be pulled down because of the failure of the policy agreed as part and parcel of the decision to ruin the coal industry in this country.

Over the last 48 hours, a lot has been said about the harsh nature of some of the responses to the news of Mrs Thatcher’s death, but the House needs to understand the reason. Before, during and ever since the attack on the coal industry and the people in it, Governments of both colours were warned of the impact of the policy. We have seen the reaction of people whose frustration is heartfelt. They have lost their sense of place in society. They are being made to feel worthless. They are being cast aside like a pair of worn-out pit boots. They have seen their community fall apart and their children’s opportunities disappear. They are not being listened to, and sadly some of that has boiled over this week.

After today’s debate those people may never be listened to again, and Mrs Thatcher’s lack of empathy, her intransigence, her failure to see the other side and her refusal to even look at the other side has left them bitter and resentful. They are hitting out in a way that is uncharacteristic of miners and their communities. Her accusation that the enemy within was in the mining areas of this country still rankles. I was not an enemy within. My hon. Friends the Members for Midlothian (Mr Hamilton), for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery), for Blyth Valley (Mr Campbell), and for Lanark and Hamilton East (Mr Hood) were not the enemy within. Nor were people like Joe Green, who died on the picket line at Ferry Bridge in Yorkshire, David Jones who was killed at Ollerton colliery, Terry Leaves and Jimmy Jones who were killed in south Wales, or three young boys—Darren Holmes, aged 15, Paul Holmes, aged 14, and Paul Womersley, aged 14—who died scavenging for coal to try to keep their families warm.

It is understandable that people feel bitter that we are here today to remember the legacy of Mrs Thatcher. All we wanted was the right to work, not just for ourselves but for our kids. It was taken away. The funeral next week will take place 20 years to the day since Easington colliery was closed. Please do not blame the people in my part of the world if they choose that day to pay a tribute very different from that being paid in the House today.

6.49pm

Mr Andrew Tyrie
(Chichester) (Con)

Share

We can see, from the speeches of the hon. Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson) and others, the deep emotions that Margaret Thatcher still inspires.

So many us from the Government side are still here for this debate simply because Mrs Thatcher was the inspiration for our going into politics in the first place. There was her sense of public service and duty and her conviction that even the toughest task, including Britain's ungovernability, could be tackled. There was her conviction that the state had lost sight of its essential role of protecting our freedoms, that it was encroaching on them and that it had to be rolled back. Above all, there was her patriotism—she wanted to restore pride in our country and others' respect for it. As far as the last century is concerned, she will come to be seen as the greatest standard bearer for freedom that the House has produced.

Column 1674

My first meaningful encounter with Margaret Thatcher took place at 7.15 am in a windowless back room in Conservative central office just before a press conference during the 1984 European elections. Having been at central office for only a few months, I was unnerved to find myself placed opposite her. She had, it seemed, read all the extensive briefing that we had prepared for her. She fixed me with a stare. Her first question identified an apparent contradiction in the briefing. Before I had time to admit that I did not know the answer, Geoffrey Howe, who was sitting next to me and did, saved me by replying.

Margaret Thatcher was kind enough to add me to a lunch party at Chequers after those elections. No doubt identifying me as the junior man, she told me to sit next to her for lunch. Within minutes, she announced to the table that I was far too thin and insisted on overseeing my consumption of two puddings.

I met Mrs Thatcher sporadically over the following few years. I was at the Treasury, with a ringside seat for the Thatcher-Lawson row, the rights and wrongs of which—and there were both—are for another day. More generally, I had a chance to observe several of her well-known traits. At the heart of her approach was her instinctive understanding that the restoration of prosperity depended on supply-side reform: breaking down the entrenched privileges—of the professions as much as of the trade unions; simplifying and reducing taxes; cutting back the tangle of regulation; and enhancing individual opportunity and aspiration. She wanted to break with the consensus of an over-mighty state and a dependent people.

Some have been arguing recently that Mrs Thatcher's reforms are responsible for the failings of the banks today. I doubt that. Whatever the merits of the prudential regulation that came with the big bang in the '80s, those rules were no longer in place when the crisis broke five years ago; they had been replaced by another set of rules put there in the 1990s in both the US and the UK. In any case, the notion that Mrs Thatcher, who cared most of all about the consumer and the taxpayer, would be an apologist for the banks, is implausible. She would have found the abuse of market power by some bank leaderships for their own gain at the expense of the rest of us every bit as deplorable as the behaviour of trade union leaders.

Most of Mrs Thatcher's legacy on the supply side survives, although her supply-side reforms were, to some degree, reversed by the last Government. Perhaps I should take this opportunity to say that, in my view, the importance of the supply side is still not yet fully recognised by this Administration.

It has been said today that Mrs Thatcher's judgment faltered at the end, and there was perhaps a touch of that hubris that always lurks in No.10's bunker after a long stay. The pain of her reforms still lingers. Over the longer view, none of that, I think, will detract from her legacy. What will linger in the memory is the single most extraordinary achievement of any leader in the post-war era—that of turning a failing country and a basket-case economy into a country that had recovered its self-respect and had a future.

Column 1675

6.54pm

Geraint Davies
(Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op)

Share

I speak as one who was a 14-year-old schoolboy in south Wales when Margaret Thatcher became party leader and as a representative of the Swansea West constituency. Mrs Thatcher was obviously a person of steely determination and focus who cared not about the ebb and flow of opinion or focus groups, but about her strategic vision to deliver change, and that is good. However, she should be judged on her own terms—on whether she did deliver harmony where there was discord and hope where there was despair. Certainly in south Wales, she failed on those two counts. On whether she delivered a better Britain, she did for some and did not for others.

Her leadership was born in the economic and political trauma of the 1970s. Inflation peaked at 25% thanks to oil price increases, the miners' strike got rid of Ted Heath and then the Labour Government were held together by a Lib-Lab pact that tried to bring down inflation through pay relationships with the trade unions; it had some success approaching 1978.

According to my predecessor Alan Williams, a former Father of the House, Callaghan said, "I think we can have another round of pay restraint—the unions won't want Margaret Thatcher as the new Prime Minister." How wrong he was. We had the coldest winter for 16 years, strikes lasted until February 1979 and an election was called after a vote of no confidence. Saatchi's then brought forward "Labour isn't working" and delivered Margaret Thatcher. That was a cruel irony, because unemployment went up from 1.5 million to 3.2 million between 1979 and 1983. That was the human cost of bringing inflation down by 4%. That certainly did not deliver harmony at all.

Mrs Thatcher was deeply unpopular then. The Labour left was split and the SDP broke away in 1981. In 1983, the SDP-Liberal Alliance got 25% of the vote to Labour's 28%. Had it not been for that and the Falklands war, Mrs Thatcher might not have won in 1983. When she did, her first focus was to settle scores with the miners who had brought down Ted Heath. She built the coal stocks up in the winters of '83 and '84 and announced that there would be closures and that the National Coal Board would be privatised and sold off. Scargill, of course, fell into the bear trap. He did not hold a vote, there was a 12-month strike—a third of the pits were still working—and a great mining industry was destroyed. As has already been described, we are currently consuming 50 million tonnes of coal a year. but there is no coal industry. Near my constituency, there is the Tower colliery, a co-operative through which the miners bought their own mine, and it operated successfully for 10 years. But communities have been left on their own in despair without support. That is the politics not of hope but of fear, as Nye Bevan put it.

Economic Thatcherism is a matter not just of using unemployment to keep down wages and unions, but of mass privatisation. Crucially, the proceeds of that privatisation—the £70 billion, alongside the £80 billion from oil—were not used as they should have been: to renew our industrial infrastructure, our hospitals, our transport and our schools. The legacy was one of squandering instead: we ended up in a situation where money was being used to keep people on the dole and to provide tax breaks. We ended up with an unmanaged oil system where high exchange rates meant that manufacturing was declining much faster than it should have been.

Column 1676

Ultimately, Mrs Thatcher got re-elected through the Lawson bubble that burst. In the final chapter, while the rich were getting richer, she wanted the poor and the rich to pay the same tax for local services: the poll tax. As we saw the grey smoke emerge from the violent protests in London, the grey suits went round Lady Thatcher and wanted to elect a grey leader—John Major, who, of course, managed to get in. Then, naturally, everything broke down and afterwards we got a new Government who reinvested the proceeds of growth in new schools, hospitals and opportunity. I fear that some of Thatcher's legacy will involve going back and claiming that everything she did was right. What she did not do, however, was to deliver what she

should have delivered—harmony and unity, a future that works and a future that cares, rather than a divided nation. I very much hope that we will not continue to press along the road of division and austerity, but will build a new future.

7.00pm

Share

Philip Davies
(Shipley) (Con)

Margaret Thatcher was my political inspiration. I only wish that I had been here in Parliament when she was Prime Minister, as it would have been a rare treat indeed to be on those Benches and able to support a Government with whom I agreed from time to time.

My earliest political memory was of the Falklands war of 1982. I was 10 years old and remember coming home from school to see what was going on over in the Falklands. It was during that crisis that I built up my admiration for Margaret Thatcher. I was born in Doncaster and was brought up in Doncaster North, the constituency of the Leader of the Opposition. As he made clear, it was a strong mining community. My father was involved with the local Conservative party—there are not many Conservatives in Doncaster—and as soon as I was old enough to deliver leaflets and knock on doors, my father had me out delivering leaflets and knocking on doors. I loved elections—we never used to win any, but I still loved them.

People have often said to me that it must have been incredibly difficult going around mining communities in the mid to late-1980s supporting Margaret Thatcher and a Conservative Government. It was not difficult at all. I believed in Margaret Thatcher to my core, and when we believed in somebody in the way I believed in Margaret Thatcher it was not difficult to go knocking on doors to support the great things she did for this country. It was not Margaret Thatcher who ruined those mining communities; it was Arthur Scargill who ruined them—and let no one forget that.

Margaret Thatcher was a conviction politician. She believed that politics was all about trying to persuade people of what she believed in rather than just telling people what she thought they wanted to hear. That is the kind of politics that I believe in. She did not need focus groups or opinion polls to tell her what to believe. She was instinctively in tune with the British public.

I remember from when I was working at Asda that the best retailers were the ones who instinctively knew what the customers wanted without having to go to a focus group to ask. The worst chief executives of retailers were the ones who always had to be told what the focus groups were telling them and what the opinion polls were telling them. For me, it is exactly the same with political leaders. The best political leaders such as Margaret Thatcher instinctively know what the public want and where they are—they do not need opinion polls—and the worst political leaders are those who have to rely on those polls because they know no better themselves.

Column 1677

Too often, politicians in this country try to be popular. My advice would be, "If you want to be popular, don't be a politician" because of the inevitable consequence that they will become unpopular. Popularity in politics will always be a temporary thing. One thing that can last for ever in politics, however, is respect. Even if not popular, a politician can still be respected, and Margaret Thatcher was one of those politicians. She was a Marmite politician: people either loved her or hated her, but she was universally respected, even among her political foes, because she knew what she believed in, she stood up for it and she delivered it to people. Whether people agreed with her or not, they trusted in her as a politician because she was doing what she thought was genuinely the right thing to do. We need more politicians like that.

Margaret Thatcher won three general elections on the trot, and the best way to sum up her achievement is to recognise that more people voted Conservative in her third general election than they had done the first time she won in 1979. That is a remarkable achievement showing how she built support over those eight years. Tony Blair, on the other hand, won three general elections but lost 4 million voters between the last and the first election. That goes to show the difference in calibre between those two politicians who might otherwise be closely compared.

Margaret Thatcher was voted out by her own party. This occasion gives me the opportunity to put on record my utter contempt for those in our party—people who were not fit to lick her boots—who ousted her in 1990. That did an awful lot of damage—but not just to the country, as it did long-term damage to the Conservative party as well.

Anyone wanting to sum up Mrs Thatcher should look at her final performance from the Dispatch Box as Prime Minister. It was one of the finest performances that has ever been seen in Parliament. I am delighted that the right hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Simon Hughes) was in his place to speak today. He will remember, probably quite painfully, how she wiped the floor with him when he intervened—*[Interruption.]* I think it was Michael Carttiss who said from the Conservative Benches that she could wipe the floor with the lot of them, and that was absolutely true—she could. During that debate, I wonder how many Conservative Members wondered, "Oh, Lord, what have we done?" They got rid of the greatest Prime Minister this country has ever seen. There will never be another like her. It is a privilege to speak in this debate and to hear some of the great stories that help us to find the true Margaret Thatcher—one I will for ever admire.

7.05pm

Share

Wayne David
(Caerphilly) (Lab)

I believe we should all show respect to Mrs Thatcher, this country's first woman Prime Minister. As Prime Minister of this country, she undoubtedly achieved things in which all of us, on both sides of the House, can share a pride. Most notably, she signed the Good Friday agreement, and under her leadership this country liberated the Falklands and encouraged the freedom of the peoples of eastern Europe. Let it be said, too, that she played a key part in the development of Britain's role in Europe and the single market. The young Margaret Thatcher was a good European. We should acknowledge too, if not to celebrate it on the Labour Benches, that Mrs Thatcher won three consecutive general elections. There were and still are many people who admired her undoubted strength and resolve, which she had in abundance.

Column 1678

To show respect, of course, does not necessarily mean that we have to be in agreement. It is worth remembering that many people throughout the length and breadth of this country suffered because of Thatcher's ideology and the policies she pursued. It is important for us all to recognise that—and no part of the United Kingdom suffered more than the valleys of south Wales.

I was born and brought up in a largely mining community—Cefn Cribwr, near Bridgend. Both my grandfathers were miners and both knew from first-hand experience how difficult and dangerous coal mining was. Like so many of my generation in south Wales, the miners' strike of 1984-85 left an indelible mark on me. Let me be clear: the tactics of Arthur Scargill were wrong and played into the hands of the Government; but it was wrong, too, that the Government gave the impression of relishing the opportunity to mobilise the state against working people who were trying to defend their jobs, their families and their communities. In our country, no opponents should ever be described as "the enemy within".

During that long year of the miners' strike, there was undoubtedly real hardship. In my own village, we organised a support group and raised hundreds of pounds to help miners' families. The same happened throughout south Wales. If the hardship of the strike was bad, what happened afterwards was truly awful. Within months of the end of the strike, nearly all the remaining collieries in south Wales were closed. Nowhere was worse hit than the Rhymney valley, the greater part of which I now have the privilege to represent. Two of the biggest collieries in south Wales were within the Rhymney valley—Bedwas and Penallta. Each employed more than 600 men. Bedwas was closed literally weeks after the strike and Penallta followed suit a couple of years later.

Those closures were body blows to the valley. Closing the collieries was bad, but what made things worse was the absence of any real attempt to provide alternative employment or even training for those made unemployed. There was, it is true, a much heralded "valleys initiative" but that, like so many other Government initiatives of the time, was all hype and little substance. In the aftermath of the miners' strike, unemployment rocketed, and so did economic inactivity.

Today, many of the scars of the 1980s are still with us. After 1997, we saw more enlightened and interventionist policies pursued, but we are still nevertheless grappling with the country's historic legacy. In large part because of what happened during the 1980s, unemployment and economic inactivity in the south Wales valleys are still above the UK average, and poverty and deprivation are still a scourge.

I do not believe that the huge social fracture in the south Wales valleys was the result of any individual's spite or malice; but it was the result of adherence to monetarist economic theory—a theory which elevated individuals above the community, which put short-term profit before long-term prosperity, and which made people subservient to uncontrolled market forces.

Column 1679

Many Conservative Members genuinely believe that Mrs Thatcher achieved many great things. They are entitled to that view. Undoubtedly Mrs Thatcher did some things that we can all take pride in; but for my constituents, and for many ordinary people throughout south Wales, Mrs Thatcher has left a legacy which they will not celebrate and which they will never forget.

7.10pm

Share

Mr Bernard Jenkin
(Harwich and North Essex) (Con)

The House has already heard much about Margaret Thatcher as a huge political figure—the iron lady who dominated British politics and world politics—but my wife and I grew to know her after she retired from the House of Commons. We came to know someone who was far from the arrogant or heartless figure portrayed by her adversaries. She was someone who must have forced herself to be strong, to hide any self-doubt, to deny herself any weakness, in order to live up to an ideal of herself. She was anything but arrogant.

I do not know how many times we saw her reject the adulation that was so often heaped upon her. She felt undeserving of such praise and standing ovations. She would say how she could never have achieved anything on her own, that her Governments were a team effort in which many played their part. This was genuine humility, not arrogance. And we have read and heard so much about her acts of personal kindness.

It was her passion for the truth that made her such a dangerous adversary in argument—a danger which she harboured long into old age—and she loved a good spat. She met some bright young candidates before the 1992 election—me included—*[Interruption.]* I beg your pardon. Two now serve as senior Ministers of state. As they tried to justify UK membership of the exchange rate mechanism, she scorned the one who had worked closely in her Government with heavy inflection. "Oh," she said, "I am so disappointed with you." She listened to the other, who argued that the exit from the exchange rate mechanism would involve too much loss of face for the Government. She retorted: "Loss of face? What is loss of face compared to the loss of 350,000 jobs? If you think that, you're a fool. There's the door!" Not an easy introduction for an aspiring candidate.

What we miss from politics today is her certainty, her seriousness, her clarity of principle, her fusion of the practical with her sense of moral purpose. Those who disagreed with her undoubtedly felt that to be arrogance on her part, but she felt she was a guardian of greater truths and principles, which were far more important than her mere self. This, with her formidable intellect, gave her an extraordinary prescience about the world. How right she was about the exchange rate mechanism, and about the Maastricht treaty and monetary union. I would caution those who try to use her name in support of the EU, as it has become, as though she would ever have put her name to the Lisbon treaty or anything like it.

Column 1680

Another myth that this debate helpfully dispels is that she had no sense of humour. When she arrived in Essex in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) for the 1992 election campaign, a junior reporter from the *Essex County Standard* breathlessly caught up with her hectic pace and asked, in front of 200 other journalists, "Do you agree that the Conservative campaign is lacking in oomph?" Mrs T retorted, with heavy irony, "That's what I'm here for, dear."

She will always be revered as a woman of principle with iron determination, even by those who disagree with her. Her premiership was about restoring national self-belief, something few can deny she achieved, and that is what we must now do for ourselves. It has become an axiom in the coverage of reaction to Margaret Thatcher's death that she was divisive, which ignores the fact that the UK was already bitterly divided. We need to hear about the scars that industrial decline has left in many constituencies represented on the Opposition Benches, but that should not detract from her achievements; nor should she be blamed personally for what was, in many respects, an inevitable transition of economics.

We should regard some of the more unseemly reactions to her death as a backhanded tribute to her, a reminder of the attitudes she had to overcome in order to achieve what she did, but let the argument about her legacy be based on the facts and not the myths which her opponents would prefer to believe. Spending on health, education, pensions and welfare continually increased under her premiership. The number of people in work increased by 1.8 million. Manufacturing output was significantly higher when she left office than when she was first elected. Wider home ownership and share ownership spread wealth more widely than ever before; social mobility was greatly increased. The incomes of every sector of society, including the poorest, increased in real terms. Income taxes paid by the richest 1% of the population increased from 11% to 15% of the total tax take.

As she grew older, we regarded Lady T less and less as a former Prime Minister, more and more as a favourite aunt or grandmother. Sometimes it was hard to believe that this small, frail lady had once held the world in the palm of her hand. The whole nation will be for ever in her debt.

7.16pm

Share

Mike Gapes
(Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op)

Thinking about what to say today, I looked at my bookcase, and I came across three publications from the 1980s: "Thatcher's Britain: A Guide to the Ruins," to which I contributed in 1983, "Breaking the Nation," published in 1985, and the Fabian Society's pamphlet "ABC of Thatcherism," published in 1989. I do not have time, in four minutes, to quote any of them, but they are well worth reading, although they may be out of print.

I was the parliamentary candidate in 1983 in Ilford North. We had huge, enthusiastic meetings for the Labour party during that campaign, but because of the split in our party, the SDP and the divisions, we had a terrible defeat. The lessons for Oppositions to draw from that period are that it is essential to preserve party unity, and essential to recognise that enthusiasm for one's party and hatred for the other side is not necessarily a guarantee of a victory.

Column 1681

In February 1990, the opinion polls in this country put the Labour party at 56%, under Neil Kinnock, and the Conservatives at 23% under Margaret Thatcher. We know what the Conservative party did in its ruthless manner, which has been mentioned by previous contributors to the debate, but there is a lesson there for all of us in opposition: you cannot count your chickens about what the position might be in two years' time.

In the brief time remaining, I want to say a few words about foreign policy. Mrs Thatcher was absolutely right to sign the Single European Act. She was absolutely right to be in favour of enlargement of the European Union. The consequences of those policies have influenced the politics of this country ever since. That is why we have free movement of people in the European Union. That is why we have the current debate about immigration policy. A lot of that is to do with economic decisions taken at that time. It is well worth our thinking through the consequences for the future.

On other foreign policy issues Mrs Thatcher was wrong. We have heard about South Africa and her attitude to Nelson Mandela, and I am very pleased that Nelson Mandela is still with us today, in this world, and I hope he carries on living for a decent period of time, so that he is able to understand more about the changes that have taken place in this country since the days of Margaret Thatcher, because one thing she did was to cut the overseas development budget. It went down to 0.26% of GDP, yet this coalition—I praise them for it—has kept to Labour's pledge of funding at 0.7% of GDP, which shows that what is being done in the world today is very different from what she did in government.

One other thing that Mrs Thatcher got wrong was her attitude to the unification of Germany. She was vehemently against it, but as a result of that unification, and at great cost to the Germans in the west, we have seen the peaceful transformation of central and eastern Europe, as well as the enlargement of the European Union and the end of communism in our continent. Those fantastic achievements could not have been achieved without the support of Margaret Thatcher but, above all, the man responsible was Mikhail Gorbachev, whom she recognised as a man she could do business with. As we heard, she should be praised for that, because she convinced Reagan, although she sometimes tried to rein Reagan back when she was wrong to do so, as at the Reykjavik negotiation, where he was ahead of his time and ahead of the world today in aspiring to a world without nuclear weapons.

Share

Several hon. Members

rose—

Share

Mr Deputy Speaker
(Mr Lindsay Hoyle)

Order. May I just appeal to everyone to be brief, so that nobody misses out? Hon. Members have spent a lot of time waiting on the Benches.

7.20pm

Share

Miss Anne McIntosh
(Thirsk and Malton) (Con)

I rise to pay a personal tribute to a very great lady. Baroness Thatcher broke the mould in three distinct ways: she showed the way to women coming after her and showed us that we should aim high; by her example, she opened the door to meritocracy, not political aristocracy; and she spread democracy across Europe and the wider world.

I have cause to be personally grateful to Margaret Thatcher, having fought my first general election in 1987. Of course, we were all offered our treasured photograph with Lady Thatcher, and mine still stands on the mantelpiece in the family home. We were then granted a couple of words with the great lady. She put her arm around me and said, "Now my dear, where do you work at the moment?" I had to tell her that I worked in Europe, but I softened the blow by saying that I did work for the Conservatives in the European Parliament.

Column 1682

I lost that election, but in 1989 I was elected as MEP for Essex North East, which included the town of Colchester. Margaret Thatcher started her working life as a chemist in Colchester and I believe that for a while we were both Essex girls, though perhaps not at the same time. Her sister then also settled in north Essex and I was delighted to make her acquaintance. My abiding memories of my time in the European Parliament are the speech she made while President of the Council of Ministers, which had wild interruptions from Ian Paisley senior, as we have come to know him, and the overtures she made to Mikhail Gorbachev. I was in Berlin, attending a European Parliament Committee on Legal Affairs meeting, on the day the wall fell, and that will be one of my lifelong memories. That presaged the move for cities such as Warsaw, Prague and Budapest to join the European Union. I am delighted that it was her foresight that encouraged many of us politicians and Conservative party agents to go those major cities in central and eastern Europe, and the Baltic states, to explain how political parties were formed and how political elections were fought.

Margaret Thatcher opened up the single European market, allowing British companies to compete in areas such as transport, insurance and financial services. It is difficult to believe now that at that time it was impossible to obtain a cheap air ticket without staying over on the Saturday night. By opening up aviation to a new generation of air travellers, particularly the young, political ideas were allowed to flow more freely.

More than anything, I have fond memories of the inspiration and aspiration that Margaret Thatcher gave to so many of us. As many hon. Members have said, she allowed people choice to better themselves. She allowed many to buy their council houses and own property for the first time, and she allowed many to own shares in previously nationalised companies that had just been privatised. In short, people now living in Thirsk, Malton, Filey, Pickering and Easingwold, and elsewhere across North Yorkshire and the rest of Britain, have a better choice and a better life because of her premiership.

Who would have thought that less than 100 years after women gained the vote, the Conservative party would have been the one that returned the first lady Prime Minister? She gave people such as me and my generation—Thatcher's children—the confidence to seek a career in public life.

7.24pm

Share

Chi Onwurah
(Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab)

I did not intend to speak in this debate because, unlike many here, I did not know Margaret Thatcher personally and I have no desire to intrude on personal grief, particularly that of family and friends who have suffered a great loss. However, this has become a public debate on Mrs Thatcher's legacy and having heard so much about how much she welcomed different views, I think it is appropriate to give the House the views of some of my constituents and of my home city of Newcastle.

Column 1683

Words cannot express the almost visceral dislike with which some of my constituents regard Mrs Thatcher, so I shall not attempt to express it. Instead, I shall speak briefly about her impact on my life and on the north-east. Just as Mrs Thatcher was a child of Grantham, I was a child of Newcastle, although this was in a council flat rather than a grocer's. Just as she grew up always knowing that she wanted to be a politician, I grew up always knowing that I wanted to be an engineer. I grew up in a city and a region that valued engineering—making and building things. It was the birthplace of the railways, and it was the powerhouse of the country, with the coal beneath our feet, the steelyards and the great ships being launched from Wallsend and Sunderland.

When I was accepted to study engineering at Imperial college it was the proudest day of my life—until my election of course. So hon. Members can imagine how my heart sank when the Prime Minister of our country said, not long after, that engineering and manufacturing were the past, that the future was services and that the world would be our workshop while we would keep our hands clean. I had no desire to keep my hands clean. I had already seen what that policy was doing to the north -east: the unemployment; the communities devastated; and the lives of men and women robbed of meaning and pride. The statistics speak for themselves: between 1979 and 1987, the level of employment in the north fell by 1.3 million; 97 mines had been closed by 1992; Sunderland, the largest shipbuilding town in the world, no longer built ships; and Consett had lost the industry that had been a part of its fabric and identity for more than 140 years. I ask Conservative Members to contrast the huge bail-out that a Labour Government offered the financial services sector to protect jobs and investment with the brutal, bone-crushing and soul-destroying destruction that Margaret Thatcher's Government offered the shipbuilding, steel and mining industries, losing those very skills which we now need so very much.

There are those who say, "It was all part of the harsh reality of the new global order", but that is not true. Change was necessary, but it is the Government's job to protect communities from the impact of change. That change could have been managed; there could have been a transition and that could have been invested in. There was another way, and Nissan, which has been mentioned, provides an example of that. It is a great private sector success story that has been enabled by the support and investment of central Government, local authorities and the unions. The 2008 intervention by the previous Government through the car scrappage scheme and bringing forward training enabled Nissan to go through a difficult period and showed that intelligent active government is possible.

Mrs Thatcher's most meaningful legacy in the north-east is the unemployment across the region, but I would not like to close my remarks without paying her tribute. We have heard how she fought hard and tenaciously for the people she thought she represented. My tribute to her will be to continue to fight for the people I represent.

Share

Several hon. Members

rose—

Share

Mr Deputy Speaker
(Mr Lindsay Hoyle)

Order. We are now down to only Government Members. Let us keep an orderly line. Everybody will get in, but they must keep it short and aim to speak for three minutes, and no more than four.

Column 1684

7.30pm

Share

Mr William Cash
(Stone) (Con)

I spoke in the conference motion on 22 November 1990, by which time Margaret Thatcher had decided not to stand again, and in circumstances that I do not believe any other Prime Minister, certainly of her stature, ever experienced. The irony of her going is that, unlike other Prime Ministers, who continued in office until a departure of their choosing, she lived out her retirement in the certain knowledge that on the issue that primarily brought about her fall —that of Europe—she had been right. They put her in a dungeon downstairs, underneath this Chamber. I went down there. She was dressed in black. She was traumatised. It was a disgrace. I do not know how it happened, but it was appalling to witness.

The event that precipitated her fall was the personal statement by the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, now the right hon. Lord Howe of Aberavon. I do not doubt his sincerity, but I challenge anybody to go through that speech and agree with a single word of it. There was a complete commitment to the exchange rate mechanism. There was the issue of economic and monetary union. There was this and that, but she was turfed out of office for no other reason than that they disagreed with her on Europe. Others have said that it was because of the poll tax or because they feared losing their seats, but it was not; it was because of that one main issue.

There is much more that I would like to say, but I will not. I will simply say, in conclusion, that in my judgment there will not be a Prime Minister of her stature for decades to come. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister for his veto and for his Bloomberg speech on the five principles, but I also say that Margaret Thatcher, as Prime Minister, was the greatest defender of our freedom. She understood the European issue. She stood up for the freedom of people in this country and in eastern and central Europe. She was a great Prime Minister and I pay tribute to her.

7.33pm

Share

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown
(The Cotswolds) (Con)

It is an honour to be called to speak on behalf of my constituents on this very sad day. In paying tribute to Margaret Thatcher, I would also like to pay tribute to someone who has hardly been mentioned in the debate: her late husband, Denis. There is no doubt that, without Denis, Margaret Thatcher would not have achieved all that she did. She was not only a great wife, but a great mother to her two children, and I send them my condolences today.

Margaret Thatcher was probably this country's greatest peacetime Prime Minister. That is why I and a number of colleagues are here in the House today. We were inspired by Margaret Thatcher. There has been a certain amount of revisionism by one or two Opposition Members today about the malaise of the 1970s, but if they look at what really happened and at the mess this country was in when she took over in 1979, they will see the huge achievement she brought to this country.

Column 1685

She brought a huge achievement not only to this country, but to the world. She overcame what Winston Churchill foresaw when he made his famous speech at Westminster college, Missouri, and talked about the descent of the iron curtain across the continent of Europe. She saw that and went ahead with her great friend and ally, Ronald Reagan, to form a united front against what he called the "evil empire." We saw the breakdown of the iron curtain, and the people of Warsaw, Budapest, Bucharest, Tallinn and many other European capitals have a lasting reason to be incredibly grateful to her. I do an awful lot of work for the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, which works to build democracy around the world, an initiative that Margaret Thatcher started, for which I am extremely grateful.

The second time I encountered her was at the Conservative party conference in 1984. We were woken by an enormous bang just before 3 o'clock in the morning. It was, of course, the Brighton bomb. She came to the conference with fortitude and said that this nation's will would never be broken by terrorism, and that led to the solution in Northern Ireland.

It was the grocer's daughter from Grantham who broke the glass ceiling, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said, and proved that in this country someone can rise right from the bottom to the top, and that if they work hard and do the right thing, they can rise to the maximum of their ability. She found people who had been in unfortunate circumstances but who, through hard work, had formed businesses and got to the top in this country. We saw a property-owning democracy in this country. Many of the formerly nationalised industries were sold off under her watch and put into the private sector, where they are now flourishing as worldwide businesses. That social movement in this country is one of her huge legacies.

She made this country believe in itself after the Falklands war. Many people had said it could not be done, but she took the risk and we recaptured the Falklands, and I am delighted that a few days ago 98% of the Falkland Islanders voted to remain with this country—*[Interruption.]* It was 99%. I think that only three people voted against.

Politicians of Margaret Thatcher's stature come about only once in a generation. She was the greatest peacetime Prime Minister.

7.36pm

Share

Dr Julian Lewis
(New Forest East) (Con)

It is a shock for those of us who are old enough to have been politically active in the 1970s and '80s to realise that a 40-year-old MP today was just four years old when Soviet deployment of deadly SS-20 missiles began in 1977. At the same time, here at home, Labour MPs, including a sitting Cabinet Minister, were being deselected in their constituencies by Marxist and militant infiltrators. I am pleased that the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) rightly acknowledged that it was Margaret Thatcher who saved the Labour party by forcing it to expel the extremists and return to moderation.

To that I will add another short list that others could undoubtedly extend. Margaret Thatcher gave the unions back to their members by making postal ballots for trade union elections compulsory. She freed the Falklands and, indirectly, caused the downfall of dictatorship in Argentina—something that President Kirchner would do well to remember. She secured the future of Britain's Trident nuclear deterrent, as I trust my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition will continue to do, despite the blandishments of the absent Liberal Democrats. She insisted on the deployment of NATO cruise missiles, without which the hard-line grip on the Kremlin would undoubtedly have lasted longer. She worked with Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev to secure the intermediate-range nuclear forces treaty of 1987, which eliminated cruise missiles, the Pershing missiles and the Soviet SS-20s, paving the way for what happened two years later.

Column 1686

No one did more than Margaret Thatcher to bury the far left at home and defeat totalitarian leftist extremism abroad. The history of freedom is in her debt, as are we all.

7.38pm

Share

Mark Pritchard
(The Wrekin) (Con)

I rise to pay tribute to Lady Thatcher and offer my condolences to her family and close friends. I would like to put on the record my thanks to all her loyal staff over so many years, not least Crawfie and Mark Worthington, her dedicated chief of staff right up to the very end, who is no doubt working on her behalf as we speak.

For me personally, and for millions of people in this country, Margaret Thatcher was an inspiration. She was also an inspiration to people all over the world. At home, she was the personification—the epitome—of aspiration. She rightly reminded us that whatever a person's background—whatever their race, religion, gender or sexuality—if they worked and studied hard they could get on and succeed. No mountain was too high to climb and no dream was too ambitious to fulfil.

She was also right to believe in sound money, as the Prime Minister pointed out earlier, and in strong defence, and to believe that the state should have a strong role, but not a domineering role or a nanny role. She was right to believe in the power of the individual to win, whatever obstacles were put in their way by their background or their circumstances, and to believe that Britain still had a vital role to play in the world.

For millions abroad, she was a torchbearer for liberty, freedom and democracy. She gave hope to the hopeless. She gave courage to the disheartened at home and abroad. For millions in the grip of the Soviet era, she was the Iron Lady, prepared to stand up against oppression, tyranny and opposition. The same oppression reigns over North Korea and Iran today, and we must show the same resolve.

Margaret Thatcher governed for all and led for all. She was a conviction politician and not, as we have heard from some on the Opposition Benches, a prejudice politician. Perhaps the best tribute we can give Lady Thatcher today is to join in her unending belief that Britain's best days are yet to come. I join my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in paying tribute to Lady Thatcher and saying that she was a great Prime Minister, a great leader and a great Briton. She was Mrs Aspiration.

7.41pm

Share

Mr John Baron
(Basildon and Billericay) (Con)

Margaret Thatcher was once asked who wore the trousers in her household. It was at the height of her power, and she retorted quickly, "I do, but I also wash and iron them." It made a good impression and reminded everybody of the fact that she was a very humble person with great humility. Many colleagues on both sides of the House who are more eloquent than I am have testified to her many qualities and achievements, her strength of character, her belief in conviction politics and her belief in freedom, democracy and opportunity.

Column 1687

I would like, if I may, to focus on one accusation levelled against her by both Opposition Members in this debate and by the media more generally, which is that she was a divisive figure. If those who levy that charge mean that she intentionally went out to create division, conflict or whatever else, I disagree. If they mean, however, that she, through her policies and convictions, forced people to face the facts and to face what was obvious, I wholeheartedly concur.

I am honoured to take part in this tribute debate—we have heard some great speeches today—but there is a danger that we will forget just how bad the economic situation was in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as what she had to tackle and to deal with to bring this country round. We forget that for the best part of two decades successive Governments had pursued inflationary policies to try to gain full employment or something near to it. The unions had become all-powerful and they could not be tamed, with successive wild-cat strikes. All sorts of economic chaos resulted. We had Chancellors going to the IMF cap in hand, the three-day week, the lights turned off, the rubbish piled high in the streets and the bodies not being buried in cemeteries.

If I can add anything of value to this debate, looking at the age profile of many of my colleagues, it is that having lived through the 1970s I can testify to what it was like. It was absolutely dire—[Hon. Members: "It was horrible."] As my colleagues say, it was horrible. The atmosphere was full of pessimism. There was no hope and no aspiration. We were the sick man of Europe. She, through her policies, her conviction and her belief in aspiration, opportunity, kicking back Government controls and reducing Government spending, brought this country round. If testimony is required to how successful she was, we need only to look at the fact that very few of her major policies—I can hardly think of any—were reversed by the Governments who succeeded hers. Perhaps her greatest legacy is that she converted the Labour party from a party that was doing no good for this country, in the sense that it was pursuing extreme left-wing policies, and dragged it kicking and screaming to the centre of the political landscape.

In conclusion, she once said that it is no use being someone in politics, one has to do something with politics. That will be her lasting legacy and this country will ever be grateful for that approach.

7.45pm

Share

Mr Nick Gibb
(Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con)

Many in this House can speak more eloquently about Lady Thatcher as a person than I can, particularly my hon. Friends the Members for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns) and for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), who made moving speeches. To me, Lady Thatcher was a more distant figure whom I met at party events and as a parliamentary candidate hoping for a photograph with her for the elections. Whenever I met her, I always found her kind, supportive and interested in how I was getting on.

Column 1688

As a student, when I was a member of the national committee of the Federation of Conservative Students, we met Mrs Thatcher in Downing street. I was writing a pamphlet calling for the end to the National Union of Students' closed shop and urged her to include it in her trade union reforms. I remember her looking at me straight in the eyes and saying, "I'm glad to see you're coming round to my way of thinking". It was, of course, as were large parts of our nation and many other nations across the globe.

Others have talked about Lady Thatcher's role in ending the cold war, her part in bringing freedom and prosperity to the former Soviet empire and the positive lasting legacy of her speech to the College of Europe in Bruges, but it is her role in turning around Britain and restoring our economy, which benefited many millions of people in this country, that I believe is so important. Lady Thatcher provided leadership to a cause and to a country. She led the battle of ideas with the idea that an overweening state crowds out the private sector and free enterprise and the innovation that comes with them; the idea that tax rates of 83% and 98% stifle initiative—a battle she won so convincingly that no subsequent Government have dared even to contemplate raising rates to such levels; and the idea that the money supply was key to controlling inflation, which was again a battle that she won so convincingly that it was a Labour Government who

established the Monetary Policy Committee. She fought the battle of ideas with courage and, in doing so, inspired a generation.

I was 14 when Mrs Thatcher became the leader of the Conservative party and it was her leadership, her articulation of ideas and her determination to do the right thing that inspired me—and many others—to take an interest in politics. Her economic reforms resulted in GDP per head rising in real terms from £7,700 in 1979 to more than £10,000 by 1990. The wealth that that created did not did not just go to champagne bars in the City. It resulted, for example, in the proportion of houses with central heating rising from just 54% in 1979 to more than 80% by 1991 and in the proportion of owner-occupied housing rising from 55% to 66% by 1990. She truly was a transformational leader—a leader who changed this nation for the good and for good—yet the hostility to her from the left and, indeed, from some on the Conservative side of the House was remorseless. She stood up to that hostility because she believed she was right, and she was right.

As a newly selected parliamentary candidate all set to fight the Labour stronghold of Stoke-on-Trent Central, I was devastated when in November 1990 Conservative Members of Parliament deposed her as the leader of our party. To this day I wish my party had not done so, but as Cecil Parkinson, another great statesman of the 1980s for whom the battle of ideas was always the spur, said:

"Her ideas and vision live on."

He was right, too: her ideas, her vision and her achievements will always live on.

Column 1689

7.49pm

Andrew Rosindell
(Romford) (Con)

Share

It is an honour to rise today to pay tribute to someone whom I have always believed to be our greatest peacetime Prime Minister, and one of the finest—if not the finest—political leaders of the Conservative party, whom many of us know to have been a compassionate and kind human being. Lady Thatcher had courage, determination and principle, but she had patriotism deep inside her. She loved this country; she was inspired by standing up for Britain and she showed that in and out of office and wore it with pride. She wore the Union flag regularly on her jacket, and when the chips were down and it mattered most, her instincts were always to put the interests of our country first. In no better example was that tested than when Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands in 1982. I wonder whether those islands would be free today had she not been our Prime Minister.

She was a kind person who treated everyone as an equal. She was humble, and good in many ways that the public never got to see. She had a Christian upbringing and throughout her time as Prime Minister, and throughout her life, she upheld those Christian values. She supported the Queen and our constitution. When the Queen and the royal family had a difficult period in the early '90s, she was on the television and in the media making it clear that the country should unite behind Her Majesty. She understood what it was to stand up for Britain and why it was so important to do so.

Margaret Thatcher showed bulldog spirit as well as compassion for the British people and people across the world. She fought for freedom for the people of eastern Europe, and the people of Latin America were free because she defeated the dictatorship in Argentina. She liked younger people and encouraged the next generation. Many of us here today from the Prime Minister downwards were inspired by Lady Thatcher. It is her legacy that we inherit and that we must protect, uphold and advance still further. We must fight to put the interests of our country first, as Lady Thatcher always did and would have continued to do had she remained in office for longer.

7.52pm

Daniel Kawczynski
(Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con)

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When I was first selected as the parliamentary candidate for Shrewsbury in 2002, I was asked by the Conservative Women's Organisation to come to the Conservative social club. There was a huge portrait of Margaret Thatcher and a seating plan of the dinner from when she came to Shrewsbury in 1981. All the ladies—Mrs Elaine Weston and others—spoke to me in glowing terms and with tremendous respect about their enormous pride that Margaret Thatcher had visited Shrewsbury. Although 20 years had passed since that occasion, they could recount almost every single aspect of her trip to Shrewsbury, such was their profound love and admiration for this lady. Others have spoken about conviction politics, but when politicians are generally not seen in a good light, we can all learn a great deal from the tremendous respect that this lady generated among millions of people in our country.

Column 1690

When I was first elected to Parliament in 2005, I remember being invited to have dinner with Margaret Thatcher at the Carlton club. Sitting next to her at dinner, I was absolutely mesmerised. My heart was beating very, very strongly, and it was one of the most fascinating experiences of my life. Afterwards, when photographs of us were taken, I remember towering over her because of my height of 6 feet 9 inches, but thinking how she towered over me in every other respect.

As somebody of Polish origin, I can say that Margaret Thatcher's visit to the shipyards at Gdansk in 1988 was transformational and gave the people of Poland great hope that there was the possibility of defeating communism. Nobody did more to give the people of eastern Europe that tremendous hope that a better day would come. I remember visiting my beloved grandfather who was a great Polish patriot. Late at night, we listened to the BBC World Service—of course, it was illegal to do so —very quietly and with the curtains drawn so that nobody would hear us. I remember tears swelling in my grandfather's eyes, such was the tremendous hope that she gave through those broadcasts to those imprisoned people living behind the iron curtain.

Finally, I remember being chairman of the university of Stirling Conservative association in 1992. Our local MP was Michael Forsyth and we were told that we would lose all our seats in Scotland in 1992, and that we would lose Stirling. I was desperately upset and spent the election going up lamp posts putting up "Vote Conservative" signs because I was so told the socialists could not pull them down. I was so disheartened because I felt that Neil Kinnock was so left-wing that if that man got into office he would destroy everything that my heroine had built up for this country.

My first chance to meet Margaret Thatcher was when she came to speak at a nearby rally. She gave me hope, and the next day I went with my best friend to the bookies. I had only £700 left until I started my summer job, and I put £500 on the Tories to win with a majority of more than 20. Thanks to Margaret Thatcher, I made the best investment of my life.

Mr Deputy Speaker
(Mr Nigel Evans)

Share

So the drinks are on Daniel after this debate.

7.56pm

Mr Lee Scott
(Ilford North) (Con)

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I start by putting on the record my condolences, as well as those of my family, Ilford North Conservative association and the many constituents, not only from the Conservative party but from all political parties, who have e-mailed me to offer condolence to Baroness Thatcher's children and grandchildren. It is worth remembering today on all sides of the House, and indeed outside the House, that we are talking not only about this country's greatest peacetime Prime Minister, but about a mother and a grandmother. Perhaps we should all show the respect deserved by the memory of a great woman both inside and outside this House.

I will say a few brief words about my memories of Margaret Thatcher. I met her on four or five occasions, the first of which was in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell). I said to her at the time that I was a bit concerned about my desire to be a Member of Parliament. I left school aged 15 and did not have any qualifications, but I had a desire to work and help people. She said to me, "If you have the desire to do it and want to work and help people, then do it." She inspired me to be here today and, like many Members from across the House, I can honestly say that I would not necessarily be here today if it were not for Margaret Thatcher. She will always have my gratitude for that.

Column 1691

On other occasions, when Margaret Thatcher walked into a room people knew that she was somebody special and that they were in the presence of a figure who would go down in history. If we put the clock forward 100 years, I am sure that people will still remember Winston Churchill, Margaret Thatcher, Mr Attlee, perhaps even Mr Blair, certainly the current Prime Minister—[Hon. Members: " Hear, hear.]—I had to get that in. Without any doubt, however, they will remember Margaret Thatcher as a great Briton and somebody who saved our country. May she rest in peace. God bless her.

7.58pm

Nigel Adams
(Selby and Ainsty) (Con)

Share

I want to contribute briefly to pay tribute to and thank Margaret Thatcher for saving our country and for inspiring me, and many thousands of people from ordinary working-class backgrounds in this country, to achieve and to get on in life. Her understanding of what working-class aspirational people wanted was a great strength, and like Clement Attlee she was a Prime Minister dedicated to the cause of working-class aspiration. Some try to propagate the myth that Mrs Thatcher was simply on the side of the wealthy, which is nonsense. She did not win three elections by appealing only to the wealthy or to the south of the country.

I recall as a schoolboy at the end of the 1970s the national decline, the endless strikes, the lights going off, and the rubbish not being collected. Ordinary people were simply fed up with how our once proud country had been turned into a basket case. Margaret Thatcher turned our country around and saved it. She wanted to improve ordinary people's lives by giving them more personal freedom and encouraging them to stand on their own two feet. She certainly did that for me. I was a young person from a working-class background, the grandson of coal miners. All of a sudden, there was a national figure and a leader of our country who made it clear that people can achieve success, whatever their background or walk of life. That was a politician I could relate to. She is the reason why I am standing in this Chamber today.

I had the pleasure of meeting Baroness Thatcher on a couple of occasions. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski), I was petrified to be in her presence. I greatly remember, and will always cherish, her words of encouragement to me when I was a candidate and, after the election, when I told her I had won the Selby and Ainsty seat.

Baroness Thatcher was a conviction politician and a truly great Briton, and we owe her a great debt.

8.01pm

Harriett Baldwin
(West Worcestershire) (Con)

Share

It is with great humility that I rise today to pay my personal tribute to Baroness Thatcher. I sincerely appreciated the excellent speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Epping Forest (Mrs Laing), on the role Lady Thatcher played in inspiring so many women in politics. It is a remarkable statistic that only 100 women in the history of this country have become Conservative MPs. Lady Thatcher played a crucial role not only in inspiring us, but in raising money for us. I met her at fundraisers for "Women2Win" or for individual female candidates, including current Members of the House.

Column 1692

Lady Thatcher was always absolutely remarkable in her steadfastness and support for women in the Conservative party, but—this comes better from a Conservative woman MP than a man MP—she was also always absolutely immaculately dressed. She always looked fantastic. Has it not been wonderful over the past few days watching those old news reels and seeing that, on every occasion she faced as the first female leader in the western world, she always wore exactly the right thing? Whether she was in a tank in Germany or dancing with a former movie star—Ronald Reagan—she always looked impeccable. That held true even very recently, when my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns) invited some of the new intake MPs to meet her. She asked, with that piercing curiosity, "What's your majority?"

It is only right that we pay tribute to Lady Thatcher's personal assistant, Cynthia Crawford, who lives in Worcestershire, and who made such a huge contribution to Lady Thatcher's life. Cynthia was such a loyal friend throughout Lady Thatcher's retirement years. She ensured that Lady Thatcher always looked impeccable—they worked together very well on that.

Another secret about Lady Thatcher's later years is that, as a result of that friendship, she came frequently to Worcestershire. She spent quiet retreats and holidays at the cottage in the woods in Malvern, where she found peace and beauty in the country. She grew to love the Malvern hills—she was inspired by Elgar, who was born there. It gives me and the people of West Worcestershire great satisfaction to know that she enjoyed the beauty of the great constituency that I have the privilege to represent. I am so pleased that she found peace there on earth, and I wish her peace in the next life.

Several hon. Members

Share

rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker
(Mr Nigel Evans)

Share

Order. I am grateful for the hon. Lady's brevity, which means we can get everybody in as long as everybody sticks to their time limit.

8.04pm

Nadhim Zahawi
(Stratford-on-Avon) (Con)

Share

Not only Britain but the whole world has lost a fierce champion of human liberty. A son and daughter have lost a mother. Our thoughts are with her family and the people who cared for her. The great lady has gone to a better place, and we know who will be there waiting for her, whisky in hand.

I was not close to Lady Thatcher personally, yet she had an enormous influence on me and on my family's life. We arrived in the UK in 1978. I grew up with my father and mother admiring the new Conservative woman PM, as they referred to her. Beneath that admiration was the recognition of her background, which led us to the belief that, if we, as a new Kurdish family, worked hard and did our bit for our community, as her grocer father had done, we could do well in our new country.

Column 1693

When I was selected as a parliamentary candidate in February 2010, Margaret Thatcher was one of the first to send a handwritten letter of congratulations, with an invitation to join her for drinks. I turned up in London—she had invited a handful of new candidates—and she wanted to know how things were in Stratford-on-Avon. I explained that the people were worried about the state of the country's finances. Her sound advice was this: "We need to win, Nadhim, to ensure that we can fix things again, and make the tough decisions the country needs."

Lady Thatcher's gift to this country was to make it great again. Her gift to the world was to confront aggressive communism and the cold war. Many colleagues have spoken eloquently about what Margaret Thatcher meant to them. I want to end by quoting two short notes I have received that show what she meant to those whom she cared most about: the people of her country. The first is from a serving soldier in the Household Cavalry, who writes:

"She was a real legend who walked her own path, stirred passions on both sides of the fence and made a sick Britain great again."

The second note is from Dr Noeem Ahmed, who works in the NHS. He writes:

"My dad is a 1st generation Bangladeshi who arrived here at 13."

Dr Ahmed's dad was upset at Margaret Thatcher's passing, and said:

"She was a leader on the side of the small businessman."

The testimonies of those young men prove that the great lady will live on.

Margaret Thatcher made this country understand the importance of living within its means. She knew that only when we achieve that can we be ambitious for, and positive about, our position in the world. Next week, the country she loved will mark her passing. It is right that we do so with the full ceremony of Church and state, because 30 years ago, in a storm-lashed corner of the south Atlantic, she stood up for the inalienable rights of British citizens, despite coming under great pressure to look the other way. In doing so, she showed the world that we are not yet finished, and that Britain's name and Britain's word still matters. She gave us hope that our finest hour lies not in the past, but in our future. For that, the nation owes her its thanks.

8.08pm

Dan Byles
(North Warwickshire) (Con)

Share

It is truly a privilege and an honour to speak in this debate. I grew up in the 1980s. I was five years old when Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister, and 15 years old when her premiership came to an end. When I was a child, I genuinely did not know it was possible that somebody other than Margaret Thatcher could be the Prime Minister of Great Britain.

Margaret Thatcher was a great inspiration to me and my family, and particularly to my mother. When my parents divorced when I was nine years old, my mother became the single mother of two children. She was inspired by Margaret Thatcher's example and words and did not look to others for help when she faced the classic problems that single mothers face. How do they provide for their children? How do they afford child care, what do they do during school holidays? What do they do when their children are sick? With no experience whatever of running a business, my mother established a small shop with our home above it, which enabled her to look after my sister and I, and yet be there for us when we were not at school.

Column 1694

Both my parents left school at age 16 and neither went on to university. My sister left school at age 16 and did not go on to university. I will always be incredibly grateful to the Conservative Government that Margaret Thatcher led in the 1980s for the assisted places scheme. I had an assisted place at Warwick school. As a result, I was the first and only member of my family to stay at school beyond 16 and go to university. Ultimately, as a result, I gained a commission in the British Army and eventually become an MP. I therefore feel honoured to be here today.

I will keep my speech very brief, Mr Deputy Speaker, and finish by reading the full quotation for the Deputy Prime Minister:

"There is no such thing as society. There is a living tapestry of men and women and people and the beauty of that tapestry and the quality of our lives will depend upon how much each of us is prepared to take responsibility for ourselves and each of us prepared to turn round and help by our own efforts those who are unfortunate."

8.10pm

Michael Ellis
(Northampton North) (Con)

Share

It is an honour to speak in this debate. It has been six hours very well spent. I would have waited 60 hours to speak in this debate.

My late noble Friend Baroness Thatcher was a true British patriot. She fought for Britain unashamedly and was devoted to this country. She devoted her life to public service and set an example to me at a very early age and to many of my colleagues who have spoken in the House today. She clearly loved this country with all her formidable might. She also defended the liberty of the millions of people in the former Soviet Union satellite states in eastern Europe. Together with Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, she can be said to have helped those people. Of course, she and Ronnie won the cold war.

Lady Thatcher rose from being a grocer's daughter in a northern English town to become a titan of the 20th century—a true colossus on the political stage. She was a deeply principled leader and was prepared to do unpopular things. In that, she is followed by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. What strikes me most is her tangible moral courage and her indefatigable bravery. Her political courage, about which many colleagues have spoken, was rooted in principle and in a determination to do what she thought was right for this country.

One of her best friends was Airey Neave MP, a hero of the second world war who was blown up by an IRA bomb in a cowardly attack here at the Houses of Parliament in 1979. She was defiant about that afterwards. Likewise, she displayed steadfast defiance in the face of the murderous IRA attack at the Grand hotel in Brighton in 1984, which killed five people. She insisted on carrying on and gave her conference speech the following day, apparently despite a serious warning of another bomb. She was indefatigable and courageous in every respect.

Although it is popular for those who did not know her to caricature Lady Thatcher as uncaring, it is quite clear that she was deeply compassionate and considerate, as her staff and those who were bereaved will today testify. She worked harder than anyone else; she was better informed than anyone else; she was magnificent.

Column 1695

As several Presidents of the United States have said, she was one of America's greatest friends. She recognised the tremendous force for good and for international democracy that the United States is in the world and the leadership that it still gives to the oppressed around the world. It should not be forgotten that she was also a true friend to the Jewish people and to Israel.

I pay tribute to those who were devoted to her in her personal life, such as Mark Worthington and my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns). They have been assiduous in their care and devotion, and clearly loved her dearly.

In conclusion, she was a paragon of duty and service. Despite not knowing her anything like as well as several of my colleagues, may I still say that I will miss her?

8.13pm

Bob Stewart
(Beckenham) (Con)

Share

Many hon. Members have paid tribute to Margaret Thatcher's care for the armed forces. Thirty years ago, after my rifle company, A Company the Cheshires, was blown to bits, she flew into Northern Ireland and came with me to Musgrave Park military hospital. Thirty-five of my men had been wounded and six had been killed. She went around the beds and stopped, talked, wept, caressed, sat with and inspired those men. I was incredibly impressed.

A year later, again in Northern Ireland, Margaret Thatcher visited my company at Aughnacloy in south Tyrone. She flew in with the Special Air Service and I briefed her. I asked her, "Prime Minister, do you have any questions?" She said, "Make sure, Bob, that I meet all the soldiers who were wounded a year ago." She did. My goodness, that lady—that Iron Lady—had the heart of a lion and that lion's heart was made of gold.

8.15pm

Margot James
(Stourbridge) (Con)

Share

Shortly before he died, my father said to me, "If you get to meet Margaret Thatcher, tell her from me there were only two politicians in my lifetime who made a difference and she was one of them." The other was Churchill.

My father spoke from personal experience. Born in Coventry, he left his council school at the age of 14. He got going in business with a single lorry and delivered coal from the black country around the Birmingham area. By 1963, he had built his business up into a publicly quoted company. By then, one of his interests was a car delivery business. Ten years later, the whole enterprise was teetering on the edge of bankruptcy thanks to the Transport and General Workers Union. "All out" was the familiar refrain and it meant that any money that anybody had any hope of making would disappear in ever more fantastic wage settlements, sustained by wildcat strikes, violent picket lines and the ruthless closed shop system.

There is much talk of Margaret Thatcher being a divisive figure. She certainly became a hate figure for those whose power she challenged and eventually overcame. I sympathise very much with people who lost their jobs in the manufacturing industries that declined in the 1980s. However, a myth has grown up—propounded, I am afraid, in this Chamber this afternoon—that the policies pursued by Margaret Thatcher's Governments were responsible for the decline in manufacturing and the closure of industrial plant and coal pits. That is to deliberately ignore the fact that the decline began soon after the war and accelerated dramatically in the 1960s and 1970s.

Column 1696

The strikes, restrictive working practices and outrageous pay settlements led to a very negative climate for investment. Technological change was either resisted wholesale or was allowed on sufferance and, crucially, on condition that the same manning levels were maintained. Britain therefore lost and lost again in world markets.

By the late 1960s—a full decade before Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister—it was cheaper to import coils of steel than to buy them from the overmanned British steel works. By the mid-1970s, our old industries were kept going only by ever-increasing Government subsidy and by nationalisation. That was ultimately unaffordable and diverted money from investment in new industries and services that would provide employment in the future. To lay the blame at Margaret Thatcher's door for all that is to shoot the messenger.

I did have the chance to pass on my father's message. I did so in the presence of my late mother who, at the age of almost 90, finally got to meet Margaret Thatcher. All Mrs Thatcher could say to my mother was, "How kind of you to come." She exuded such kindness and humility that I have never forgotten it. It is a shame that the public did not see more of that trait.

To conclude, the convictions, passions and principles that guided Margaret Thatcher came to be known as Thatcherism. Her determination to stand up for Britain in Europe, for the freedoms of those who were oppressed by the Soviet Union, for the working people who wanted a stake in their future and to get on, and, above all, for the pride of Britain, is unequalled in my lifetime. It was a privilege to witness it all and I am deeply grateful to have benefited personally, both politically and in business, from the policies that she pursued with such bravery and determination. May she rest in peace.

8.19pm

Heather Wheeler
(South Derbyshire) (Con)

Share

I represent an old mining area, and, as folk might imagine, some of the e-mails that I have received have been quite lively. However, I have been reminded that unemployment in my area is now 2.8%. The old mines have gone. People remember the difficulties that arose between the Union of Democratic Mineworkers, whose members did not strike, and the National Union of Mineworkers, whose members did, but people now have jobs. People have reinvented themselves.

Some of the e-mails that I have received have been very passionate about the future that Mrs Thatcher gave to our country, and the aspiration that she gave to it. I certainly know that I am in this Chamber because of her. As a 17-year-old, I wrote a paper about why British Leyland should be privatised rather than nationalised, because it was losing £1 million a week. What an outrageous situation it was—although quite why a 17-year-old knew facts like that, I cannot imagine.

Column 1697

The change in our country has been phenomenal, and all the groundwork was laid by Mrs Thatcher. I was so pleased to meet her, and I have the photograph that I have of her with me. When I finally became leader of our council—which had always been a Labour council—the first thing that I did was to put a portrait of Maggie Thatcher in my office. I do not think that there had ever been a picture of her in any of the council offices before, except on a dartboard. That was a major change, and it meant that South Derbyshire was turning around. The future was bright—the future was blue—and we owe her so much.

8.21pm

David Morris
(Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con)

Share

We have heard some brilliant tributes from all parts of both sides of the political divide, and I hope to match them. My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns), who was a friend of Mrs Thatcher, made a very poignant and very good speech, which I believe has been replayed over the airwaves while we have all been in the Chamber.

To me, Mrs Thatcher was a huge inspiration to me, not because of her willingness to make difficult decisions but because she made me feel, at a time of bleak prospects, that there was hope for the future. I started my first business as a Manpower allowance recipient, and, indeed, I entered my first job as a "yopper". I do not know whether anyone else remembers the youth opportunities programme. At that time, after the late 1970s, we did not have much of an industry left. I grew up abroad because my father could not afford to live here in the late 1970s, but he came back after Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister, purely and simply because—as he said—"I can afford to live in my own country again".

Those who are young and of no political persuasion whatsoever may start to understand that this country has a lot of good going for it, but no one seems to say that it has a lot of good going for it. I have lived all over the world, and I have seen unimaginable poverty. I have lived in places where families were begging on the streets. That experience is hard to describe. Then I came back to Britain, where there was a free health service and free education. Here I reach out to the Opposition: all that was begun by the Clement Attlee Government. However, Thatcher actually embellished it.

We are here today to honour a lady whose political legacy—as was said earlier—will outlive us all, and will continue well into the future. Today I was very disappointed to see, in the left-leaning press, reports of the shenanigans of young people celebrating her untimely demise. If those people had been around 35 years ago, as I was, they would understand what things were like in the late 1970s. Young people cannot imagine a time when the bins were not collected, when there were power cuts and a three-day week, when the dead were not being buried, and when—worst of all—our democracy was being held to ransom by the trade union movement. Thanks to Margaret Thatcher, they need not suffer from such appalling problems. She made higher education possible for the masses. Sadly, I did not benefit from it, but now I am here with you lot, which says a great deal.

We should see things in perspective. Eighteen months or two years ago, David Hasselhoff came to the House. Everyone remembers him singing on the Berlin wall when it came down. He turned to his manager and said "Larry, did I tell you I brought the wall down?" His manager said "I think it was that Iron Lady they are making a film about at this moment in time." He said "You're right, Larry. I should audition for the part of Ronald Reagan, shouldn't I?" He is trying to save the wall for the sake of remembrance, but we should remember the legacy that Margaret Thatcher gave. As a child of the Thatcher era, I was privileged to grow up and prosper, and I am privileged to be here on this day as a Member of Parliament to—in a way—celebrate what she left behind.

Column 1698

8.24pm

Mr Dominic Raab
(Esher and Walton) (Con)

Share

Unlike many who have spoken today, I met Lady Thatcher only once, but I was nevertheless touched by her unique blend of resolve and kindness. She wrote to me after the last election, as she wrote to many of my new colleagues, urging us to

"carry the fight to our opponents whenever the time comes".

Her twilight years never dimmed that most tenacious of spirits.

Of course she had her critics and her enemies—did anyone ever get anything done without them?—but this was a woman who won three elections by appealing across tribal political divides and across society. For me, what stands out about her legacy is the fact that she was an underdog fighting for the underdog. Yes, she was renowned for her economic leadership; yes, she reminds us today that we have a choice, and that if we rise to the challenge, our better days lie ahead and not behind us; but she would never have held office for so long had she not carried people with her.

She may have caused division within the Westminster village, but in the country, because of her, 6 million took a stake in British businesses, and 1 million bought their council homes. For many more—including refugees like my father, who came here with nothing—she nurtured the flicker of aspiration, inspiring people, regardless of their background, to believe that as a result of hard work, their dreams of prosperity and a better quality of life lay within their grasp. That message resonated not just in Britain, but around the world. As cold war historian John Lewis Gaddis has observed,

"It was a blow for Marxism, for if capitalism really did exploit the masses, why did so many among them cheer the 'iron lady'?"

She was fired by a moral clarity that drove decisive action against perilous odds. We think of the Iranian embassy siege, and of the Falklands. Her most basic insight on Europe, shortly after she took office, remains prescient. She said:

"We believe in a free Europe, not a standardised Europe. Diminish that variety within the member states, and you impoverish the whole community."

That neatly sums up the malaise that afflicts the European Union today.

As others have said, Margaret Thatcher made the political weather. She forged a new consensus. That is why, after the 1997 election, the cover of *Time* magazine pronounced her legacy the real winner. That is why Tony Blair wrote in his memoirs:

"Mrs Thatcher was absolutely on the side of history…in recognising that as people became more prosperous, they wanted the freedom to spend their money as they chose; and they didn't want a big state getting in the way of that liberation by suffocating people in uniformity, in the drabness and dullness of the state monopoly… Anything else was to ignore human nature."

Column 1699

When Caesar learnt of Mark Antony's death, he lamented:

"The breaking of so great a thing should make

A greater crack".

Today, we ensure that the passing of so great a statesman echoes from this Chamber. Margaret Thatcher was the ultimate conviction politician: our greatest peacetime leader.

8.27pm

Fiona Bruce
(Congleton) (Con)

Share

I remember experiencing, as a student in the 1970s, the power cuts and the three-day week. I remember studying by candlelight. I recall literally crying with sadness and shame as I watched rubbish piling up in our streets on television screens and heard of families who were unable to bury their dead. Then came Margaret Thatcher, a Prime Minister who showed remarkable political leadership in standing up to and ending that industrial anarchy. She restored our nation's much-needed dignity, and my profound respect for her, and that of millions of people across our nation, was birthed then and has endured ever since.

Clearly, she blazed a trail as a woman, and as importantly for me, she stood out as a conviction politician. She had clear beliefs, and she lived and led by them, and in doing so inspired me and many others—beliefs such as the importance of personal and social responsibility and accountability; of hard work and enterprise; of the imperative of endeavouring to balance the books, whether with a household budget, a business or when managing public funds; of family and strong communities created and sustained by active citizenship; of a sense of duty, service and a moral code, no doubt influenced by her father, a Methodist lay preacher; and of a strong nation state, but not a state that nationalises society.

For me, having and adhering to those convictions as she did, distinguished Margaret Thatcher from a mere politician and raised her to the status of stateswoman. Just by being there as Prime Minister, she was a standard bearer for women, but she was very much a wife and mother too, and I would like to pay tribute to her and Denis for their enduring commitment to their strong marriage, which I am sure in large part enabled her to fulfil her role as the nation's leader. As a woman, no doubt she was many times deeply hurt within herself by the outrageous slings and arrows that accompanied political leadership, but with Denis's support she weathered them all with dignity and composure in the service of this nation, and for her brave example we owe her our thanks.

She must too have been hurt when her view of society was utterly traduced, after words she used in a magazine interview were quoted totally out of context. Of course she believed in society, and in strong, enduring societies made up of committed relationships of men, women and families, each playing their part. In that same interview, she spoke of our

"duty…to look after our neighbours".

It reflects ill on those who misinterpret her on this issue.

Column 1700

Likewise, to attribute to her the excesses of materialism, selfishness and greed, as some in the media have done, is wrong: an equally gross distortion. Enterprise, as I learnt from her over the years of building a business, is about creating something that contributes to the welfare and well-being not just of the individuals working within it, but of the community and country. It is about having a sense of social responsibility as to what to do with success, if that follows.

Margaret Thatcher epitomised for me the fact that one individual, given hard work and commitment, can make a remarkable difference. I am sure that even she would have agreed that no one gets everything right all of the time, but her example has inspired me to believe that whether at home, at work or in our communities, whether in voluntary groups, public service or further afield, every single individual has the potential to make a real and positive difference and a remarkable contribution, whatever their circumstances, sphere or start in life.

It has been a privilege to pay tribute in this place to Margaret Thatcher, one of the greatest leaders our country has ever known. In closing, may I reflect again on the kindness that she exhibited to so many. May I finish with a tribute from several ladies who serve in the Members' Tea Room? I asked them today whether they knew her, and unprompted they immediately responded, "Oh, she was lovely. A true leader. A wonderful lady. We loved her."

8.32pm

Mr Robert Buckland
(South Swindon) (Con)

Share

I am glad to be able to add my voice to the warm and proper tributes paid to this most remarkable of Prime Ministers. I joined the Conservative party back in 1985 in South Wales in the middle of the miners' strike. It was another world politically. We have heard a lot about the politics of division. The truth is that the country was a different place and the issues at stake were pretty visceral. I played my part in campaigning for the Conservative party that I believed in then and believe in now and with which I am proud to be associated.

At a time when politicians seem to loom very large in the lives of us all, Margaret Thatcher loomed the largest. Thinking about it, the role of politicians now looms somewhat less in our lives precisely because of what she achieved. She came to power in an age when far too many of the major decisions affecting day-to-day life in this country were made directly by the state, which possessed far too much control over too many of the levers of power in Britain. Her greatest legacy is that she ceded control over many of those levers and gave power back to the people.

Margaret Thatcher's uncanny knack of understanding the aspirations and concerns of the people of this country was reflected in her deep commitment to wider home ownership and her passionate belief in trusting families and individuals to make the most of the key decisions affecting their lives. She shared the instinctive suspicion of the British people for those who wielded and abused unaccountable power. Her fight to tame militant trade unionism here at home and her fight against Soviet hegemony abroad were testament to that innate understanding. The message for us today, in the House and beyond, is that we should not shy away from facing up to those who abuse power, whether in the form of a poorly regulated banking sector or monopolistic self-interest.

Column 1701

Much has been made of Margaret Thatcher's background as a scientist, and there is no doubt that that was important, but she was also a lawyer. She was a qualified member of my profession, and I firmly believe that that honed her skill not only for debate but for analysing evidence and for testing it in argument before putting it to the people. She developed policy by debate and discussion, but once her mind was made up she was determined and took action. She did not shy away from the maxim that it was deeds, not words, that mattered.

The hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) described Mrs Thatcher as a Gladstonian Liberal, but she was far more than that. She was driven by ideas but not ideology, which makes her very firmly a Conservative. She understood the value of meaningful tradition, and her beliefs in freedom, the rule of law and the old Tory slogan, "Trust the people", shall and must endure.

8.35pm

Mark Menzies
(Fylde) (Con)

Share

I will keep my remarks short as many other hon. Members wish to contribute. I should like to focus on one specific policy that affected my life. Having listened to my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Dan Byles), I know that my story is not unique.

My mother was widowed at an early age and forced to raise me on her own. She was a Labour voter. She worked in a factory and she was a trade union member. She often had to get up at 5 o'clock in the morning to catch the bus, determined that she could give me the best possible chance in life. A good education and stability were important to my mum. Balancing working shifts and doing her own child care was always a huge challenge. One of Margaret Thatcher's key policies provided my mother with a huge lifeline. I refer, of course, to the assisted places scheme, for this policy had a huge benefit in my life. People from my background in Scotland did not go to private school, nor did they go to university, and the scheme gave me and others that opportunity. It not only allowed private boarding school education to become affordable to someone like my mum but succeeded in broadening my horizons at an early age.

While private education is not necessarily the best option for everyone—indeed, Lady Thatcher herself showed what can be achieved through the grammar school system—I know how fortunate I was to receive a place on the scheme. It certainly gave me confidence and a jump-start in life that would never have been possible without Lady Thatcher's hard work and belief in the power of education. I almost certainly would not be in the Chamber today without that push. As I say, my story is not unique. Some 800,000 children were ultimately supported by the assisted places scheme between 1981 and its abolition in 1997, with an average of £10,000 in total spent on their schooling—just a few thousand pounds per year.

Like many in this Chamber, I was privileged to meet Lady Thatcher on a number of occasions, but none sticks out in my memory as much as the first time I met her, when I was a teenager. I was nervous, and she was prime ministerial, but she took time to talk to me, and she made me feel like the only person in the room. One thing I never did was to say thank you for the assisted places scheme, so may I, Mr Deputy Speaker, correct that mistake now? Through the auspices of the Chair and through this tribute debate, I say thank you, Margaret Thatcher, for the assisted places scheme and for giving children such as me an opportunity that we would never otherwise have had.

Column 1702

8.38pm

Mary Macleod
(Brentford and Isleworth) (Con)

Share

It is a great privilege to speak in this tribute to the noble Baroness Thatcher. We have heard many eloquent speeches from hon. Members.

I would like to make three brief personal points about how Baroness Thatcher touched my life and why so many loved her and will miss her. First, Lady Thatcher was the embodiment of aspiration. She studied science when few women were doing so. She was one of only 25 women to be elected in 1959, when only 4% of MPs were women; now, there are 146, or 22%. Lady Thatcher was someone who absolutely believed in aspiring to the highest levels, and she proved that it could be done and that nothing was impossible. My parents always brought up my sisters and me to believe that we should aim high, work hard, try our very best, give any task 100%, and fulfil our potential. Baroness Thatcher was the epitome of this—that it does not matter who you are, where you come from, what your background is or what your gender is. You can absolutely succeed and achieve your goals and dreams, and it is what you deliver and do right now that count in life.

Secondly, Lady Thatcher was an inspiration to me and to a generation of women in this country, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Epping Forest (Mrs Laing) and also from the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart), who said that Baroness Thatcher kicked the door open even for Labour women in Parliament. I was a child of the Thatcher era and was in school and university when Lady Thatcher was Prime Minister. I did not think it strange or unusual to have a female Prime Minister. It felt natural. After all, we also had a female monarch. Lady Thatcher made me believe that anything was possible. If a woman could be Prime Minister, surely other women, too, could rise to the highest levels in business and in politics. As President Obama said,

"As a grocer's daughter who rose to become Britain's first female prime minister, she stands as an example to our daughters that there is no glass ceiling that can't be shattered".

It was Baroness Thatcher who inspired me to become a Member of Parliament, and it was she who kept me going when it took me 13 years to get into Parliament. I was told then that Lady Thatcher went through more than 40 interviews to get selected for Parliament. If it took her that number, another rejection that I received was always that much more bearable. She came to help me in my election campaign in March 2010 because she really wanted me to win my seat. She came to Chiswick with my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth) and her presence filled the room. She inspired everyone, from the youngest to the oldest. I believe that generations of women across this country and around the world will always remember her. She led the way, and it is now up to women around the country to follow her example and rise to the challenge too.

Column 1703

Thirdly, Lady Thatcher showed what it was to be a politician of clarity, confidence, conviction and courage. What an incredible role model she was. She knew clearly what she wanted to do and achieve, and she delivered it. She said in 1989:

"I am extraordinarily patient, provided I get my own way in the end."

She had a strength that was second to none. She had the courage to do what was right and not always popular. She had a vision for Britain and transformed this country. She had many tough fights to battle through, but she held to that vision and her conviction. Her courage and strength were seen in so many ways, and in 1982 she said about the Falklands war:

"Defeat? I do not recognise the meaning of the word."

Our country will always need more politicians like her. That is why I will always encourage more women to stand for Parliament, people who have a clarity of purpose and a passion, conviction and courage to deliver real change.

In conclusion, we have lost an incredible leader. We have lost a great reforming former Prime Minister. We have lost a great woman and a great friend. Baroness Thatcher was a wonderful example to all right hon. and hon. Members here today to be politicians of passion, strength, courage and conviction and to fight for Britain's interests every step of the way. As she said herself,

"Where there is despair, may we bring hope."

Her legacy will continue to inspire not only us, but generations to come.

8.43pm

Mark Pawsey
(Rugby) (Con)

Share

Just a year after the momentous Conservative victory of 1979, a newly elected MP, having won a Labour seat with a fairly slender majority, thought it would be a good idea to invite the Prime Minister along to his constituency. The newly elected MP was my father and the constituency was the one I represent today. I thought it would be interesting to look at the local paper's report.

The Prime Minister undertook a walk-about in Rugby town centre, much as the current Prime Minister was to do 30 years later. The 4 July 1980 edition of the *Rugby Advertiser* tells us that there were some hecklers in Rugby town centre. As a conviction politician, she attracted opposition. The paper tells us that some of the people were star-struck. There were emotional tears from supporters, and others asked, "Is that really her? Are you sure it isn't Janet Brown?" As some Members will remember, that was the comedienne impressionist of that time. The paper tells us about Mrs Thatcher's caring side—she signed the plaster cast of a lucky seven-year-old. And finally, it tells us something about her humility. The final sentence in the report is:

"As a delighted PM got into her car outside Rugby School—more than an hour late for her next visit to Daventry—she remarked: 'There were even more people here than I expected'."

I have asked my father about his recollections of Lady Thatcher from his time here, and much of what hon. Members have said today rings very true. He told me how supportive she had been when he talked about the concerns of a local manufacturer at Prime Minister's questions. She invited him into her office to discuss what more could be done to support that company. He also told me about the late-night votes that took place at 2 and 3 o'clock in the morning. Members in this intake apparently have it easy, with our votes at 7 and 10 o'clock. He told me how Mrs Thatcher would appear at 2 or 3 o'clock—not a hair out of place, as fresh as paint and full of life—to keep up the spirits of the parliamentary party.

Column 1704

Many Members have spoken about Lady Thatcher's input into their political careers. Her effect on my career related more to the business sector. In 1982, when I was in a secure job as a sales manager for a successful company, I heard her speeches referring to the provision of fair incentives and to rewards for skill and hard work. That kind of environment sounded good to me, and those speeches helped me to decide to risk my future by setting up and running a small business.

I eventually decided to aim for a political career, however, and my finest moment was when I joined one of the small groups referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns) and had the opportunity to meet the great lady herself. It has been a great honour for me to pay my tribute to her today.

8.46pm

Damian Collins
(Folkestone and Hythe) (Con)

Share

Mrs Thatcher was an icon of the 20th century, as many Members have said, but her real legacy will be the way in which her policies changed the lives of ordinary people such as my grandparents, who were among the hundreds of thousands who bought their council house, the workers who were given the right to decide whether to strike or whether to join a trade union and the many people who started their own businesses during the Thatcher years and were given opportunities that had been beyond the reach of many people in the past. There are thousands of legacies and thousands of stories across the country to illustrate how people remember her.

The one big thing I want to mention today, as the Member of Parliament for Folkestone and Hythe, is Mrs Thatcher's determination to do big and bold things that other Governments had struggled with in the past because the objections to them had seemed insurmountable. Among those was the decision to press ahead with the channel tunnel. That was controversial at the time, but the economic regeneration of east Kent and the benefits of the high-speed rail network through the area have all stemmed from that decision. I was interested to read the statement made by Jacques Gounon, the president of Eurotunnel, after Lady Thatcher's death. He said:

"Without the vision and drive that were so characteristic of Lady Thatcher throughout her life, the Channel Tunnel, probably the greatest infrastructure achievement of the 20th century, would never have been built."

We in east Kent are all grateful for her determination to push ahead with that project, the economic benefits of which we will enjoy today and in the future.

I was pleased to hear that the Government have today announced their support for the expansion of Lydd airport in my constituency. That is another important infrastructure project, and I am grateful for the support of the Prime Minister and the Government for it today.

Column 1705

8.48pm

Oliver Colvile
(Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con)

Share

I should like to express my thanks to the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition not only for their good words and tributes but for the amount of time that they have spent in the Chamber today when I am sure there is an awful lot going on outside.

I do not want to spend a great deal of time talking about the fact that Mrs Thatcher was the first woman Prime Minister, or about the high regard in which she is held by the veterans in Plymouth, from where part of the taskforce set sail for the Falklands. Nor do I particularly want to talk about her training as a research scientist, which enabled her to understand the effect of chlorofluorocarbons on the environment and the ozone layer, or about her time as a tax barrister, which enabled her to understand that the amount that people were taxed had a significant impact on the economy and on our pockets. No, in the next few minutes, I want to talk about the slight part that I played in the 1980s and very early 1990s, because as a Conservative party agent in the highly marginal constituency of Mitcham and Morden, I felt that I was able to play a small part. It was a pleasure not only to be in her campaign team, but to ensure that we won and held on to the Mitcham and Morden seat in 1983, 1987 and 1992.

While I was thinking about what I was going to say today, I spoke to a very good friend of mine, Michael Love, who used to be Mrs Thatcher's agent. He told me a very amusing story—I thought it amusing, others may not find it so. On the eve of the Conservative party conference, the Prime Minister and party leader used to make sure that she addressed the Conservative agents. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister continues this great tradition, which, I am told, she started. She said to Mike, "Could you kindly give me some pointers that I might be able to use?" He said, "Yes, one of the things that you should understand"—a secret I might share with the House—"is that agents see all parliamentary candidates as the 'legal necessity'." She duly took notice and included it in her speech, saying, "I do know that some of you think that we, as parliamentary candidates, are nothing more than legal necessities, but I have to tell you that some of us are more important than just legal necessities." I think that went down incredibly well.

During the course of the 1983 general election, I had to organise her visit to Mitcham and Morden. It was a marginal seat and we needed to ensure that we held on to it. We were going to take her to Morfax, which manufactured wheelbarrows used to blow up bombs in Northern Ireland. We suddenly realised that we could not take her there, because it was also responsible for creating bits of the Exocet 2, which were used during the course of the Falklands war. Instead, we took her to Renshaw, which manufactured marzipan. She was told in no uncertain terms that she had to wear a hairnet, and that everybody else, including the press and the media, had to wear a hairnet. She was brilliant and did so superbly. As one can imagine, however, members of the press and the media took no notice whatever of the health and safety regulations and decided not to, and so the whole morning's production had to be thrown in the bin, as the company was concerned about hair in the Christmas cakes.

Column 1706

I just want to say thank you very much indeed; it has been a real privilege to have had the opportunity to serve the Conservative party and to have been a part of that campaign. Mrs Thatcher empowered individuals by making sure that they had the right to buy their own homes and through the local management of schools. There was the national curriculum. Putting money into people's pockets was a magnificent thing to have gone and done, and a lesson we have to learn. We on the Government Benches need to recognise that we must be loyal to our Prime Minister—that is the one thing the Conservative party did during the course of the 1980s. We must back our leader and ensure he has our full support, because if we do not, we will be in trouble. Mrs Thatcher was an inspiration who made sure we are in a position to do that.

8.53pm

Penny Mordaunt
(Portsmouth North) (Con)

Share

We have indeed lost a great Briton, and many here today on the Government and the Opposition Benches have lost a great friend. I myself was a mere acquaintance, but like many others I felt I knew her before I met her. My childhood memories are full of her and the vibrant colour she brought to political life. Her ability to escape the normal bounds of politics and penetrate our day-to-day lives is evidenced by the fact that when I was six, and when she had been Prime Minister for less than a year, I had perfected an uncanny impression of her, which led to Mrs Thatcher to be written into my primary school production of Dick Whittington. Within three years, her leadership, resolve and reassurance would provide vision and comfort to many of my classmates in Portsmouth, as their fathers set off to retake the Falkland Islands.

In her later years, Lady Thatcher supported me and many others as we strove to get elected to this place. I was struck by her kindness and her interest in people and what they wanted to achieve. She took time to speak to me and to write to me and other Conservative parliamentary candidates when we won or, perhaps more important, when we lost. Her principle, her courage and her vision for Britain meant that she was able to motivate long after she left office.

Mourning the loss of Ronald Reagan, her great friend and western co-architect of the demise of the cold war, Lady Thatcher said:

"We here still move in twilight. But we have one beacon to guide us that Ronald Reagan never had. We have his example."

We have hers: her confidence that a conviction politician could lead her country; her unshakeable belief in the best of human nature; her optimism that this country could be led back to international respect and renown; her focus on making a real, tangible difference to people's lives; her self-confidence, not founded in arrogance but in belief in equal access to opportunity and in meritocracy; her ambition that others should achieve their ambitions; and her courage to do what she believed to be right and to take responsibility for it, to face down terrorism and the foes of freedom.

Margaret Thatcher was a warrior who fought for freedom of the individual and of nations. She believed in the nation state, but where her opponents could see only the state, she saw the nation. She believed in Britain and the British people, in our history, our destiny and our capacity to play a leading role in the world.

Column 1707

For those who were born after Lady Thatcher's premiership—a vast cohort that now includes many young adults—her legacy may be hard to comprehend, for the simple reason they have only lived in the Britain she forged. Nowadays, talk of freedom when freedom can be taken for granted seems overblown, the nearness of danger in the cold war now intangible, the destructive power of the unions so distant as to seem always doomed, triumph over an invading dictator predestined and Britain's high standing in the world an unshakeable fact. Yet personal freedom, victory in the cold war, proper industrial relations and a dynamic market economy, triumph in the Falklands and respect for Britain's voice in the councils of the world were not inevitable accomplishments. That is why they were accomplishments —her accomplishments.

As we mourn Lady Thatcher, I hope she will inspire us afresh. We should take pride in her life, her achievements and what this country was able to do under her leadership and henceforth as a consequence of it. We should celebrate a remarkable life of service and a remarkable woman.

Several hon. Members

Share

rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker
(Mr Nigel Evans)

Share

Order. We will now get everybody in. It has been a huge privilege for me to chair this debate.

8.57pm

Priti Patel
(Witham) (Con)

Share

There can be no doubt that Baroness Thatcher served our country with great distinction and honour. Her devotion to advancing at home and abroad the causes of freedom, democracy, enterprise and property ownership will serve as an inspiration for generations to come. Her record in office and her numerous political achievements are unmatched in modern history and will stand the test of time. There is no doubt that she will stand alongside the great statesmen who have graced this earth—Churchill, Disraeli, Gladstone and Pitt—as one of the finest Prime Ministers in our history, and alongside Ronald Reagan as one of the most important and influential world leaders of the 20th century.

I was proud to grow up during the Thatcher years and to see at first hand the inspirational way in which she introduced powerful changes to improve our country. As a young girl in the 1970s, and the daughter of immigrants, I was fully aware of the disastrous state this country was in. Our economy, society and politics lay crippled after decades of decline. We had become the sick man of Europe and we were seen as weak across the world. Hope, aspiration and entrepreneurship were being suppressed by the instruments of the state—militant trade unions and vested interests that stood opposed to change and reform.

Margaret Thatcher was different. She broke away from politicians who thought the status quo was the norm, and an option, and that we should just go along with the managed decline of our country. As my father always said, she ushered in a new era of hope and optimism, and she was a strength for our country.

Like Margaret's parents, my mother and father were small shopkeepers. Without Margaret Thatcher's economic reforms, which liberated and transformed this country, my parents would not have become the entrepreneurs and self-employed individuals that they went on to become.

Column 1708

There is no doubt that in Margaret Thatcher we had a Prime Minister who not only understood the importance of hard work—she herself had a tremendous work ethic that my family certainly looked up to—but obviously understood sound money, what it meant to be aspirational and, importantly, what it meant to be a wealth creator. She recognised what it meant to the people of this country to be allowed to get on with running their own lives and to have politicians take a back seat.

Margaret Thatcher was determined to smash the obstacles that held people back. She was a champion of opportunity, battling against the forces of privilege and the establishment. In my view, she was the ultimate warrior for the working class and for aspiration. She knew how to unlock Britain's strength to empower individuals and businesses. She laid the foundations for council tenants to buy their homes, lowered and simplified taxes, reduced the deficit, secured the rebate from Europe and brought democracy to the trade union movement. She worked alongside the great Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev to end the cold war and liberated the Falkland Islands.

Advancing the cause of freedom to empower people was always at the forefront of Mrs Thatcher's conviction, her political beliefs and ultimately her actions. We had a Prime Minister who demonstrated that anyone from any background could, through strong beliefs and hard work, rise to the pinnacle of their chosen profession. To me, as a young woman growing up during the Thatcher era and as an MP now, seeing how she led the way has been inspirational. She showed that women could smash through the glass ceiling by reaching the highest political office.

Mrs Thatcher was an inspiration to me and a great source of political advice as I embarked on my political career. I had the privilege of knowing her and of having her political counsel on many occasions. She was, ultimately, a real Conservative. She knew what it meant to be one—to be a patriot and a true leader of our nation.

Like many in the county of Essex, my constituents felt that they could trust and support Margaret Thatcher to safeguard the interests of this country and defend it. There is no doubt that they are saddened by her death, but as we mourn the passing of this tremendous human being—a great Prime Minister and a wonderful person—people in Britain and worldwide can take great comfort from knowing that her legacy will continue through the millions who have benefited from what she brought to this country and through the freedom that she gave millions overseas. We will remember that tremendous legacy for generations to come.

9.02pm

Alok Sharma
(Reading West) (Con)

Share

It is a great honour to speak in this debate paying tribute to Baroness Thatcher. Many colleagues have spoken with great eloquence about their personal experiences of Baroness Thatcher and her kindness. I did not know her personally and that is my personal loss. However, she was an inspiration to my family, my parents and me.

My father often remarked that Margaret Thatcher was not just the first British female Prime Minister, but the first British Asian Prime Minister. He was not joking—he does do jokes, but never about Baroness Thatcher. He always said that she might not look like us, but she absolutely thought like us. What he meant was that she shared and empathised with our values, experiences and ethos. She faced prejudice not because of her race but because of her gender. As the Prime Minister said earlier, in his moving tribute, she understood what it took to break through the glass ceiling. For immigrant families such as mine, she was aspiration personified.

Column 1709

The Prime Minister and the Government are absolutely right to push forward policies to rebuild an aspiration nation. Baroness Thatcher was the original architect of the modern British aspiration nation. She believed in people working hard and being rewarded for it. She believed in education as a great leveller. She believed in helping entrepreneurs, business and the private sector to create the wealth to pay for our public services. She believed in respect for the rule of law. Those are all values espoused by many immigrant communities, such as the one I come from.

My parents started their own business in the late '70s. As anyone who has run a business or tried to run one knows, it is pretty hard work when it first gets started. My parents certainly went through some pretty tricky times, but the one thing of which they and I am absolutely certain is that if it were not for the economic policies that Margaret Thatcher and her Governments followed, they would not have prospered—and without them, I would certainly not be here today.

Americans often talk about the great American dream, and I can say that Margaret Thatcher inspired the great British dream. What she said to all of us, whether we were from the working class or were immigrants from wherever it might be, was that it was possible for each and every one of us to reach to the stars in Britain. That is something of which I am incredibly proud. Margaret Thatcher is someone to whom my family and I have an enormous debt of gratitude, and there are millions of families like mine up and down this nation who feel exactly the same way.

It was because of Mrs Thatcher that I got involved in the Conservative party. That is why I, like many other colleagues, started delivering leaflets for the Conservative party at the age of 11. I rejoiced in her victory of 1979 and I rejoiced again in her historic victory in 1987, having spent a few weeks being the bag carrier for my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr Redwood) during the general election campaign.

Her leadership was aspirational, inspirational and transformational. She was a global phenomenon—a towering international leader who profoundly touched and affected people across the globe, not just in this country. When the sad news came that she had passed on, I—along, I am sure, with many other colleagues—received messages from friends throughout the world. Let me end by reading a short text I received from a friend who is a female politician in Indonesia who never met Margaret Thatcher. This is what she said:

"My deepest condolence for the passing away of Baroness Thatcher, who is a great inspiration, especially for many women. May she rest in peace."

Column 1710

9.07pm

Simon Reevell
(Dewsbury) (Con)

Share

I am grateful for the opportunity to make a few observations on this special occasion.

I have been struck over the last few days by the number of times I have heard the word "divisive" being used on the television—as if every one of Margaret Thatcher's policies created division, especially so in the north of England. That is not right. There are no complaints in Dewsbury about us taking on Argentina and throwing foreign invaders out of the Falklands, or about us helping to throw Iraq out of Kuwait. In Kirkburton, no one moans about us standing alongside the USA and against the USSR in a process that saw democracy come to countries of the former Soviet bloc. In Mirfield, there is no suggestion that IRA prisoners should have had political status, and in Denby Dale they do not say that the trade union legislation should be repealed so that the unions become so powerful that it is possible to turn up for the night shift with a sleeping bag and expect to get paid. Across the whole of my constituency, people nodded their heads as warnings of European federal ambition from over 20 years ago were replayed on Monday night's television.

Of course there are differences of opinion. The gentleman in Thornhill who told me he would always be grateful to Maggie because being able to buy his council house changed his life had a different outlook from that of a man in Emley who was kind enough to tell me I seemed a nice lad, but then explained that as an ex-miner he could not vote Tory. Of course, it is the latter area—industrial policy—where controversy might lie. In the early 1980s, when I had had so many problems with my Austin Metro that they sent a man from Longbridge to look at it, he shrugged his shoulders and said it was a Friday car—built at the end of the week when people were in a hurry to be away. That was not Margaret Thatcher's fault. They did not have Freitag cars at VW, and VW still builds cars. None of the manufacturers in my constituency would be thankful if the clock was turned back to the 1970s.

But what of the coal industry? On Monday, I watched an old clip of a younger Mr Scargill on television. He was telling his audience that a miner's job was not just that miner's job; it was his son's job and his grandson's job. No it wasn't: my granddad was a Yorkshire miner and he worked in conditions that were said to be cruel for the pit ponies but okay for the men. He was blown up underground twice, each time going back to work as soon as he was healed. He did not do that in the hope that his children and grandchildren would still be doing it for decades to come; he worked like that to try to ensure that his children and grandchildren would not have to work underground, swallowing dust and dirt and facing the threat of explosion and even drowning. And he was as big an NUM man as anyone else in the pit.

I remember the miners' strike because members of my family were caught up in it. For some it was about jobs, but for others it was about power—about who ran the country. The democratically elected Government ran the country, and from 1985 everyone understood that. That does not mean that there were not mistakes, but the Britain of 1990 was a far better place than its counterpart of 1979; better in the sense of who we were, of how we saw ourselves, and of how others saw us. The period from '79 to '90 was overwhelmingly one of positive achievement, and it is nothing short of remarkable that one person was the driving force behind an entire nation rediscovering its pride and re-establishing itself in the world.

Column 1711

That is why I, along with many of my constituents from Dewsbury, in Yorkshire, in the north of England, will pay our respects on Wednesday of next week.

9.11pm

Dr Thérèse Coffey
(Suffolk Coastal) (Con)

Share

It is a great privilege to contribute to the debate. I have spent the past several hours, since 2.30 pm, here in the Chamber listening to the extraordinary speeches. I want to single out my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), who spoke so eloquently and movingly about when Mrs Thatcher visited troops in a military hospital in Northern Ireland. I also want to thank my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. This may sound like a bit of creeping; it is not intended to be. As on many occasions he just got it right, as in the mixing in of lightness, reflecting the personal touches that Margaret Thatcher brought to her role as Prime Minister in Downing street and in Parliament. I also want to thank the Leader of the Opposition. He paid a very generous tribute today, and reflected well on the element of statesmanship that we should all aspire to.

There is no question but that Margaret Thatcher defined politics for a decade, if not a generation, if not a lifetime. There are two other people I want to thank today. I want to thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing the debate to happen. I also want to thank the chaplain for the prayers that were said, which I thought were very special.

Margaret Thatcher was certainly an inspiration to many in this place, and many in the country. Even now, the polls after her death show that more than half the population thought she was a great Prime Minister; any party leader and Prime Minister would hope for such ratings. I expect that every Conservative Member elected in 2010 mentioned Margaret Thatcher as an inspiration in their selection speech. In fact, I expect those people who did not probably did not get selected. Dare I say it, although the great lady of course left office in 1990, her legacy lived on, and there is no doubt that the members of our party loved Margaret Thatcher, and I believe they were right to do so.

Of course Margaret Thatcher broke through the glass ceiling, becoming the first woman Prime Minister. It is said that she found it harder to become a Member of Parliament than she did Prime Minister, but both were herculean tasks, which she achieved, with the help of her male friends, some mentioned already—such as Airey Neave, who was assassinated—and the help and support of others. To her end she would encourage people to enter public and political life, and I think many women in Parliament today are here for that reason.

Of course, Margaret Thatcher was the only science graduate to be Prime Minister. History or perhaps thinking about the weight of history was not for her. In fact, she made history. Her skills as a scientist, in the use of data and rigorous analysis, were an important part of what persuaded her. Her view could be changed if someone had the facts, rather than the emotions of other subjects.

Column 1712

I read chemistry at Oxford and I chose her college, because I had fallen in love with Margaret Thatcher by then. I had done so because I grew up in Liverpool. Hon. Members have talked about communities transformed, and we have heard about the success of entrepreneurs and small business. Opposition Members may think that we look back through rose-tinted spectacles, but people's lives really were changed. People were released; they were allowed to choose, to get on and to be free.

Of course there were impacts on communities, particularly those reliant on one major employer or industry. I lived in Liverpool when the riots happened. They did not affect my neighbourhood but they affected school friends, one of whom was supposed to come to stay with us to get away from the horrendous things that were happening. I also remember Derek Hatton, who said the most despicable thing yesterday. What I remember of him is that he destroyed my city. Militant Labour was the employer involved, and my parents, both teachers, were among the 30,000 who received their redundancy notices overnight. I have been hearing about how people were cast aside, but militant Labour tossed aside the clerk, the cleaner and the street sweeper, as well as the teacher. That is when I woke up and realised that politics mattered, and the following year I got involved in a by-election. Admittedly, the right hon. Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) won that, but I stood up; I saw that Margaret Thatcher was leading the country and making a huge

well that, but I stood up, I saw that Margaret Thatcher was leading the country and making a huge difference to people's lives, and I wanted to be part of it.

The constituency I now represent perhaps benefited from some of the issues arising from the militancy of the dockers' strike in Liverpool. Similar things happened elsewhere. Felixstowe grew as a port during that time. When Mrs Thatcher came to Felixstowe in 1986 to speak at the Conservative central council she referred to the modern industrial relations that the good trade unions had with their employers at the port of Felixstowe. We see the same thing now in much of our manufacturing industry, where some of the unions are working well. However, one thing she did was to ensure that it was the democratically elected Government who ran the country, bringing to an end to the closed shop, the "all out" and the flying pickets that crippled industry at the time.

I do not believe that Margaret Thatcher hated the state. What she hated was the state telling the people what they should want. She wanted the state to serve the people and put their needs first. She trusted people to choose. Her very first speech was about the private Member's Bill in which she opened up council meetings to the press and the public; she made sure that happened. She also did things such as putting parents on school governing bodies so that they were involved in the direction of the schools. She had backed the police, of course, but she had recognised that there was trouble there and that there was a need to reinstate trust, so in the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 she introduced the tape recording of evidence sessions. She started to bring those kinds of reforms in where they were needed.

Above all, Margaret Thatcher put the "Great" back into Great Britain, at no time more so than during the Falklands war. She believed in ideas and she trusted the people. She put that choice to the electorate three times, and the British public backed her, with an increasing number of votes from 1979 to 1987. She was truly my heroine. Margaret Thatcher, may she rest in peace.

Column 1713

9.18pm

Alec Shelbrooke >
(Elmet and Rothwell) (Con)

Share

Two people in the political world had the biggest influence on me. The one who made me a centre-right politician was Ronald Reagan—I will talk about that another time—but Margaret Thatcher did three important things to me and formed who I am, as a child of the '80s. First, she did not just abolish the glass ceiling that had been there from time immemorial—she smashed it to smithereens. That is why I, like a great number of my hon. Friends, stand here as a child of a comprehensive school; our parents had very normal jobs and we did not go to a fee-paying school. I ended up with an engineering degree and I am now a Conservative Member of Parliament, and my sister is an orthopaedic surgeon. We went through that comprehensive school system, and Margaret Thatcher said to us, "If you work hard, there is no limit to what you can achieve." We took that on. It was about a work ethic.

There are five comprehensive schools in my constituency, and when I visit them I tell the children, "I went to a comprehensive school, too, and nothing can stop you achieving whatever you want." Margaret Thatcher did for me what the tabloid press have done for children these days, who think that if they go on "The X Factor" they will become a pop star. She made us realise that if we worked hard we would achieve our dreams and that it was not just about fame and fortune.

Conviction was very important. It is about standing up for what we believe in, rather than taking the path of least resistance. Political history around the world is littered with leaders who took the path of least resistance. Conviction politics is vital. I want to give a live example for people out there today: the privatisation of British Telecom, which my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth) mentioned earlier. It is not just that before privatisation people had to wait six months to get a telephone line, or that they needed permission from British Telecom to put an extension in their house. We look today, after the death of Margaret Thatcher, at how advanced telecommunications have become in our society.

She did not privatise British Telecom in the 1980s because she foresaw that we would all be using Twitter, Facebook, the internet and e-mail and have constant access to news; she did it because she knew that the state could never do for those industries what commerce and people with experience of running businesses could do for them. All those people who have used Twitter and Facebook to make the most vile comments in recent days should remember that they can do so because they have easy access. They should try to imagine what it would be like if they had to wait six months to get a mobile phone before doing so.

My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope), in an excellent speech, said that he did not disagree with a single one of Margaret Thatcher's policies, except her decision not to stand in the second round. I agree. I do not think that I disagree with anything she did, but there is a lesson that I think we could learn on something that was not done. I passionately believe that she was absolutely right to tackle the union menace that had crippled this country and made us the laughing stock of Europe. When we look at the growth factors in western Europe and what was happening in this country, we see that we were doomed. That culminated in the miners' strike. There were rights and wrongs, but that is not a debate for today. However, I will say that it was wrong that more was not done after those communities lost their mines.

Column 1714

I think that a lesson has been learnt. Our current Prime Minister has picked up on the idea of the big society and, by looking at what happened in the 1980s as a whole, what it means to help whole communities. Yes, they were the right decisions to make and the convictions were right, but there are always consequences that must be dealt with. He rightly describes himself as a one-nation Conservative, and I agree. It is about managing for the whole country. However, I believe that Margaret Thatcher's intention was to do that. It cannot be said that she was there only for the rich, because she empowered the poorest people in society and, as has been said, she knew that education is the great leveller.

Conviction is the hardest form of governance. It will never be popular, but it is the only honourable way to govern. As the Prime Minister said recently, he is here not to be popular, but to do what is right. We owe Margaret Thatcher so much. She literally saved this country from becoming, in the current context, probably worse than Greece, Spain and Portugal are today. May she rest in peace; she certainly deserves it.

9.24pm

Bob Blackman >
(Harrow East) (Con)

Share

I have been sitting listening to the debate for some seven hours now; I worried that some of my anecdotes about Margaret Thatcher would have been used by others, so I am grateful that they have not. As we sit in the Chamber on almost the 21st anniversary of Margaret Thatcher's ceasing to be an MP and leaving the House of Commons, it is right and proper that we should honour her legacy and her life, both political and personal.

I remember the early days. Most anecdotes have been from when she dominated the House of Commons, but I well remember that it was a difficult time for her when she was first elected as leader of the Conservative party. As a fresh-faced young student, I attended one of her first speaking events after she had been elected as leader, at the Federation of Conservative Students' conference. At the time, the FCS was dominated by a Heathite element and there was deep suspicion about what Margaret Thatcher would do to the party and the country if she became Prime Minister. She espoused firm principles and a belief in free enterprise, sound money, strong defence, individual responsibility and, above all, personal liberty. As she addressed that conference, one could see the ripples of change among the young people attending the conference, probably for the first time. She transformed many of us so that we became clarion calls for change across our campuses. We fought the battle for four years after she became leader and we got our reward in the 1979 general election. We fought a war of ideas on campuses and in universities and we won, with her support and her firm view.

One anecdote that has not been told concerns the fact that when she was first elected leader and went on that first speaking tour, a brief went out from Conservative central office that she was teetotal and abhorred alcohol. As many Members will know, that was not the case. She attended a meeting at a Conservative club in the north-west and, of course, the briefing had not reached them. She had been around a series of different events, and the chairman of the club said, "Mrs Thatcher, would you like a drink—a whisky, perhaps?" The person from Conservative central office shook, thinking that there would be an explosion, and Mrs Thatcher said, "Thank goodness there is someone in this party who enjoys a drink."

Column 1715

I well remember the 1979 general election, the changes that came and the squeals of horror as the first Budget was unveiled. Next week, we will no doubt continue the rather anodyne debate about whether the top rate of tax should be 45% or 40%. We should remember that in those days it was 98%, and 68% on earned income. She abolished that penal taxation and changed the position of society once and for all. It was decisive—and quite right, too. She embodied everything that modern people aspire to and that is her lasting legacy to us.

We should also remember the terrible times that have been mentioned, with the battle for the recovery of the Falkland Islands and the personal dilemma about sending our troops to war possibly to die in defence of their country and our dominions. That decision was not taken lightly. No doubt she lost many hours of sleep when that was going on.

I well remember leaving the Grand hotel in the late hours in October 1984 and hearing subsequently about the blast that had gone off. At the time when that happened, during the early hours of the morning, none of us knew whether the Prime Minister or the members of the Cabinet were still alive. It was with great relief the following day that we found out that the worst had not happened. It could have been so different. I am sure that that, together with the impact of losing dear friends in this place, impacted on her view of the policies on Ireland.

We should remember the lasting legacy of Margaret Thatcher, whether it is the 2 million people who own their council houses as a result of her policies, the 20 million people who bought shares when she produced a shareholding democracy or the millions of people in eastern Europe who owe their fundamental freedoms of democracy and liberty to the iron will of the Iron Lady. That is her lasting legacy.

9.29pm

Mark Reckless >
(Rochester and Strood) (Con)

Share

It is a privilege to make the last Back-Bench speech in this debate. I had decided not to speak, but I thank you, Mr Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to do so now.

I came to the debate before Prayers and found that there was nowhere to sit on the Benches, so I sat just to my right on the floor. Just above me to the right was my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns). He told me—I was not aware of this—that that was the seat on which Margaret Thatcher sat after she stopped being Prime Minister. I felt that it would be a privilege to sit through the seven and a half hours of debate and tributes, and that I would not seek to speak, but I wish to address one area.

Column 1716

The day before yesterday, the noble Lord Bell said that Margaret Thatcher believed in principles, which perhaps set her apart from virtually any politician of today. I am not sure that that is fair and I believe that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, and many who sit behind him, were inspired by Margaret Thatcher, and that many of the politics in which she believed have found its way into our Government. In different ways, I believe that we are taking forward her legacy.

When I was at school, perhaps my oldest friend was Daniel Hannan, who is now an MEP. Together we observed the progress of the Thatcher Government, and we took a greater and greater interest, particularly in Europe. At the time, I was beginning to take an interest in economics and seeking to understand the interface of politics and economics. At the time, Margaret Thatcher and the now noble Lord Lawson were involved in a disagreement about shadowing the Deutschmark, and on that issue I believe that Margaret Thatcher was simply right. Even at the time, it seemed to me that it was just too good; we had had a consumer-led recovery, but as a teenager in my naive way I thought it was getting out of control. Nevertheless, I heard that there could not be a problem because the pound was at the same level against the Deutschmark and we had cut interest rates to keep it below three Deutschmarks. There was a disagreement between the Chancellor and the Prime Minister that I think was resolved terribly unfortunately for our country, but it was the Prime Minister who was right.

Towards the end of Margaret Thatcher's time in office, Europe became the central driving issue. There is too much of a trend to say that in the last days of her premiership she had somehow lost her touch or that the man-management was not there. The issue of Europe did not develop afterwards; it was there in the central disagreement on economic policy in her Government.

I do not believe that Margaret Thatcher's personal split with Geoffrey Howe was about personality. On 25 June 1989, Geoffrey Howe with the noble Lord Lawson said to Margaret Thatcher that unless she set a timetable to join the exchange rate mechanism, they would resign. She believed that Geoffrey Howe was behind that, and a month later she removed him from his post as Foreign Secretary. Eighteen months later she made a statement when she came back from the Rome summit, which we recall for "No. No. No.", and which led to Geoffrey Howe's resignation and his later speech that set in train the events leading to Margaret Thatcher's downfall. Listening to that debate again this morning, what struck me was how she answered Tony Benn when he said to her, "You now say this, but how do we know that this is any more than you seeking partisan short-term advantage by wrapping yourself in the flag? It was you who took us into the ERM without consulting the British people, you who signed the Single European Act, and you who sat in a Cabinet that took us into the Common Market without a referendum."

Margaret Thatcher answered him and said that she would have used different words. In essence, however, she agreed with him. There was a mea culpa. On those issues, he had been right and she regretted the stance that she had taken. She said those things while she was Prime Minister, and I believe that it set in train the process that led to her fall. However, she also inspired a new generation of politicians. There is the question whether we will ultimately be part of an ever-closer union in Europe or again be an independent country. Margaret Thatcher at least kept open that possibility by restoring our national strength, so that it could once again be resolved in favour of independence.

Column 1717

9.34pm

Thomas Docherty
(Dunfermline and West Fife) (Lab)

Share

It is a privilege to close this debate on behalf of Her Majesty's Opposition.

We have heard excellent contributions from right hon. and hon. Members on the Back Benches of both sides of the House, and from all parts of the UK. Because of time constraints, I cannot mention them all, but I want to single out just four. We heard thoughtful contributions from those who served under her, such as the right hon. and learned Member for Kensington (Sir Malcolm Rifkind) and the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr Redwood). We heard from Members who knew her personally. The hon. Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns) made a deeply felt contribution. He spoke with eloquence and emotion, particularly about his experiences of her in her later years.

However, while we recognise Baroness Thatcher as an extraordinary figure, we have heard many right hon. and hon. Members speak with great feeling and conviction about her influence on them and their constituencies, including my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson). I represent a former mining community in Scotland, and I believe it is only right that the House has heard from Members who represent similar communities. The debate has shown the wide-ranging views in the House. I am sure that Baroness Thatcher, as a great parliamentarian, would appreciate how the debate has been conducted.

Today has been an opportunity for right hon. and hon. Members to express their condolences to Baroness

Thatcher's family and close personal friends. The Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition and many right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House have spoken of her political achievements. She was the first woman to lead a British political party, the first female British Prime Minister, the winner of three general elections, and a leader who certainly knew her mind.

The House has heard memories of Baroness Thatcher from the world stage to the domestic stage, and the debate has been a fitting tribute to her.

9.37pm

The Leader of the House of Commons

(Mr Andrew Lansley)

Share

It is a great privilege to bring this debate in tribute Baroness Thatcher of Kesteven to a close.

The tributes to Margaret Thatcher give a compelling testimony to her remarkable character and achievements. Her family and her many friends will be very grateful for the condolences offered in many remarks. They will be grateful to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and the Deputy Prime Minister for their remarks, and grateful to many hon. Members on both sides of the House, and particularly my Conservative colleagues, who gave personal testimony not only to her political, public and international achievements, but to her private warmth and kindnesses, and even, contrary to the myth, to her sense of humour.

Column 1718

The debate captured the essence of Margaret Thatcher. We have not had the opportunity to do so in the 21 years since she left the House, but it is fitting that we could do so today. The descriptions of her achievements fully justify what my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has said of her—he has said that she is a great Briton and our greatest peacetime Prime Minister.

I am grateful to the Leader of the Opposition and his colleagues for their generous remarks. The Leader of the Opposition was followed not least by the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Sir Gerald Kaufman), who was characteristically thoughtful and generous. Margaret Thatcher did indeed break the consensus—that was her purpose and her achievement. It is perfectly possible, as he and other Opposition Members have said, to disagree with her policies but recognise the character of that achievement. The hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) said that history will judge her as a great Prime Minister, and indeed it will.

Other Opposition Members who opposed her policies did not necessarily engage in quite the same generosity of view. Margaret Thatcher would not have been surprised. She always expected her convictions and determination to achieve change to lead to opposition and argument. As my hon. Friends have said, she always relished that argument. In fact, when I was listening to the hon. Members for Walsall North (Mr Winnick), for Hampstead and Kilburn (Glenda Jackson) and for Blaydon (Mr Anderson), I could practically hear her at the Dispatch Box enjoying herself—she would have wanted to be here participating in that argument. She knew that the principles for which she always stood firm had to be fought for not just by her generation, but by every generation. That is the tribute that she would most want. It has been demonstrated in many speeches today that those values are recognised, are being upheld and will be pursued with the same conviction in the future.

Many Members have given great testimony of her public character. Not least, we have heard about her courage in the face of terrorism, whether it was the IRA and the Brighton bomb or the murders of Airey Neave and Ian Gow. We have heard about her courage in facing up to the invasion of the Falklands and taking the decisions that were never easy, but were entirely necessary to see off a dictatorship.

We have heard about Margaret Thatcher's beliefs and convictions. My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns), in a remarkable speech, said that she described politics as philosophy in action. Her convictions did not change. As my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Sir Tony Baldry) made clear, her convictions were formed in the elections in 1974 and pursued with determination thereafter.

As my hon. Friends the Members for Altrincham and Sale West (Mr Brady) and for Dewsbury (Simon Reevell) said, Margaret Thatcher's convictions did not divide this country, but in many ways united people who had never before been supporters of her party. I think that it was in the 1987 election that more trade unionists voted for Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative party than for the Labour party. They recognised, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr Lilley) said, that she had faced up to the harsh realities and did what was right. They supported her for doing what was right.

Column 1719

Many hon. Friends, including my hon. Friends the Members for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) and for Chichester (Mr Tyrie), remarked on Margaret Thatcher's patriotism and love of this country. I particularly liked it when my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) said that Margaret Thatcher's love of this country extended to a love of Worcestershire and the music of Elgar. I was pleased to hear that.

Margaret Thatcher was a radical and a reformer. Her achievements were the result of turning her conviction into a determination to achieve change.

This debate is remarkable not least for capturing a sense of her personal kindnesses and support. Of course, she was the first women Prime Minister and leader of a party. That is at the heart of how she inspired so many in the House, particularly women Members of Parliament, and women in politics across the world. She not only inspired women in politics, but supported them. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Epping Forest (Mrs Laing), the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart), my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) and many other Members who said how they had been helped and supported by her. I note that Margaret Thatcher's support and kindness extended to many Members of the 2010 intake. They might not have served in this House with her, but they were inspired by her and even personally supported by her. That is remarkable.

We have heard good examples of Margaret Thatcher's humour. I loved the example from the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr Field), who said that when he met her in the Lobby during a 10 o'clock vote, he asked, "Should I follow you?", to which she said, "People do." I shall carry that wonderful thought with me.

Margaret Thatcher inspired loyalty, a point which my hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) captured. He worked for her loyally, as did so many in this Chamber and beyond. She inspired loyalty among her staff and extended her loyalty to others, including by recognising people's service and sacrifice. The House is grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) for describing how she supported the wounded in the military hospital in Northern Ireland.

Many people in this House were inspired by Margaret Thatcher and worked with her. I had that opportunity myself. In 1979, I heard her speak in support of John Hannam in Exeter. She set out her objectives of breaking the power of the trade unions, restoring sound money and making Britain great again. She did those things. It is a remarkable thing in politics to be able to say "I am setting out with certain objectives" and then to do those things. However, she did so much more, and we have heard about so many of those things during today's debate.

Years later, when I was director of the Conservative Research Department and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and I were at the receiving end of demands for briefing and policy work, I witnessed that ability. Margaret Thatcher had a compass to steer by. A meeting with her was not a meeting at which people offered a range of views and she tried to assess where the balance lay; it was a meeting at which she adduced all the evidence and arguments, and applied her principles and convictions to them. She might express her support for free enterprise, for instance. My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester described her support for freedom and liberty against an over-mighty state. She might express her support for personal liberty, as distinct from the idea that all responsibilities could be handed over to some society without a sense of the responsibility of individuals, families and communities to step up and do what needed to be done. My hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Dan Byles) illustrated that by means of a full quotation.

Column 1720

I saw all that for myself, just in that last year before Margaret Thatcher ceased to be Prime Minister, and I found it remarkable, but what I also found remarkable were her private warmth and kindnesses. When I was private secretary to Norman Tebbit at the time of the Brighton bomb and immediately after it, she extended to Norman and Margaret Tebbit innumerable kindnesses. They included looking after Norman Tebbit at Chequers while Margaret Tebbit was at Stoke Mandeville just down the road.

It has been made clear by so many contributions from the Government Benches today that we understand how Margaret Thatcher steered this country out of decline and hopelessness. She enabled what had been the sick man of Europe to gain international respect and subsequently admiration, and even to be seen as a country to be emulated. She transformed this country, and, as the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) pointed out, she even transformed the Labour party. The tribute that we can best offer her is not just to remember that, but never to go back and always to build on her achievements: to be a country that is strong, free, respected and enterprising, and to be a people who are responsible, knowing, as my colleagues said more than once today, that the best for this country is ahead of us rather than behind us. That was her conviction. She was convinced that, given the principles that sustained her, that could be true.

Margaret Thatcher served in the House for 33 years, and she served this country every day of her life. Today, in recognition of her service and her achievements, we in the House have paid our tributes. Next Wednesday, as a country, we will have a chance to offer our thanks and to say our farewells.

I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of tributes to the Rt Hon Baroness Thatcher of Kesteven LG OM.

Sittings of the House

Ordered,

That this House, at its rising this day, do adjourn till Monday 15 April––*(Mr Swayne.)*

9.48pm

House adjourned.

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